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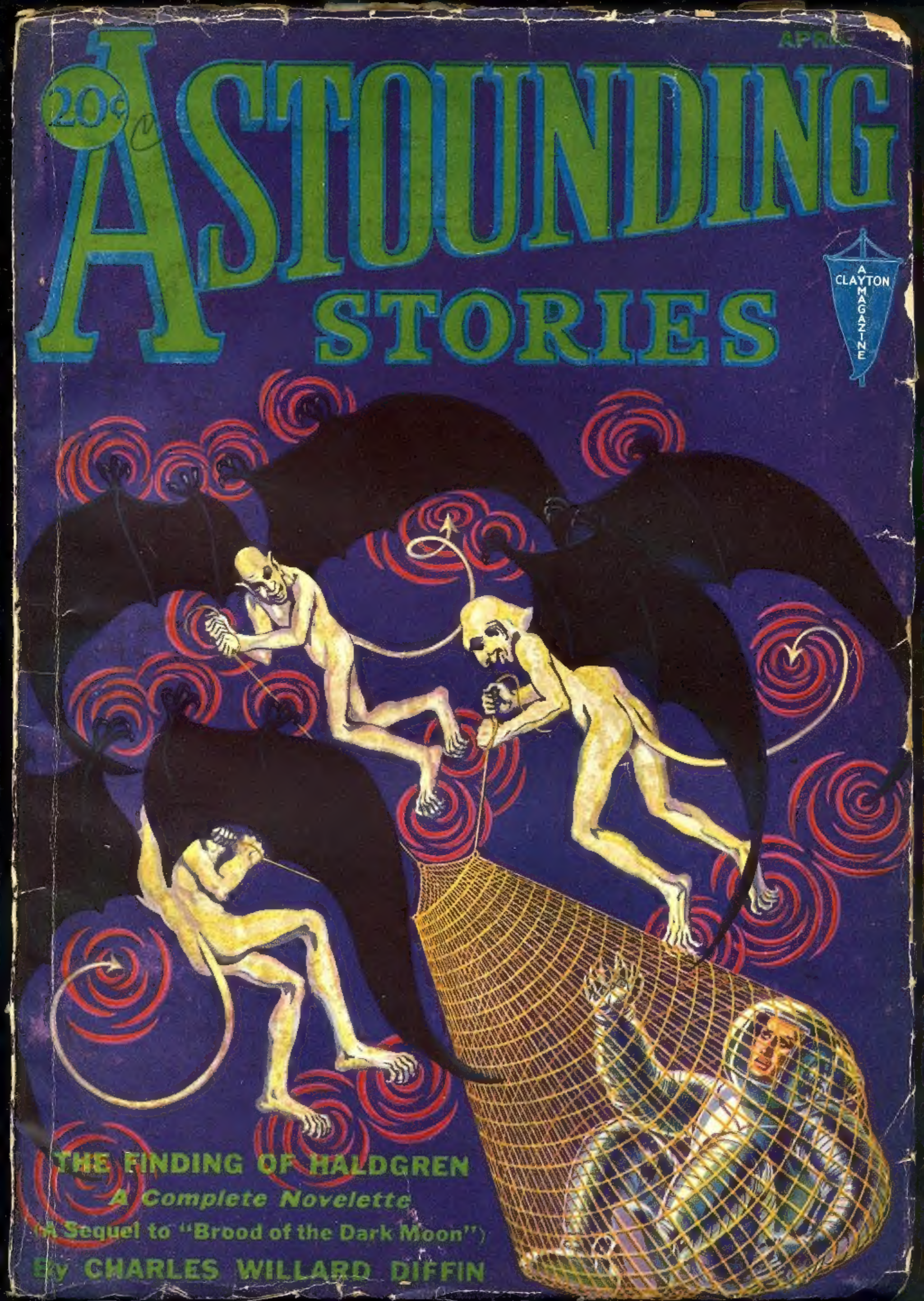
ASTOUNDING STORIES

A CLAYTON MAGAZINE



THE FINDING OF HALDGREN

A Complete Novelette

(A Sequel to "Brood of the Dark Moon")

By CHARLES WILLARD DIFFIN

ASTOUNDING STORIES

On Sale the First Thursday of Each Month

W. H. CLAYTON, Publisher — HARRY BATES, Editor

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More Than Two Million Copies Required to Supply the Monthly Demand for Clayton Magazines.

VOL. X, No. 1 — APRIL, 1933

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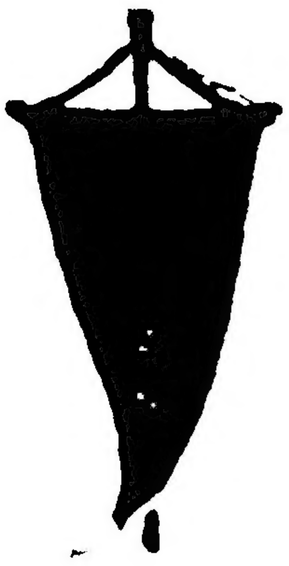

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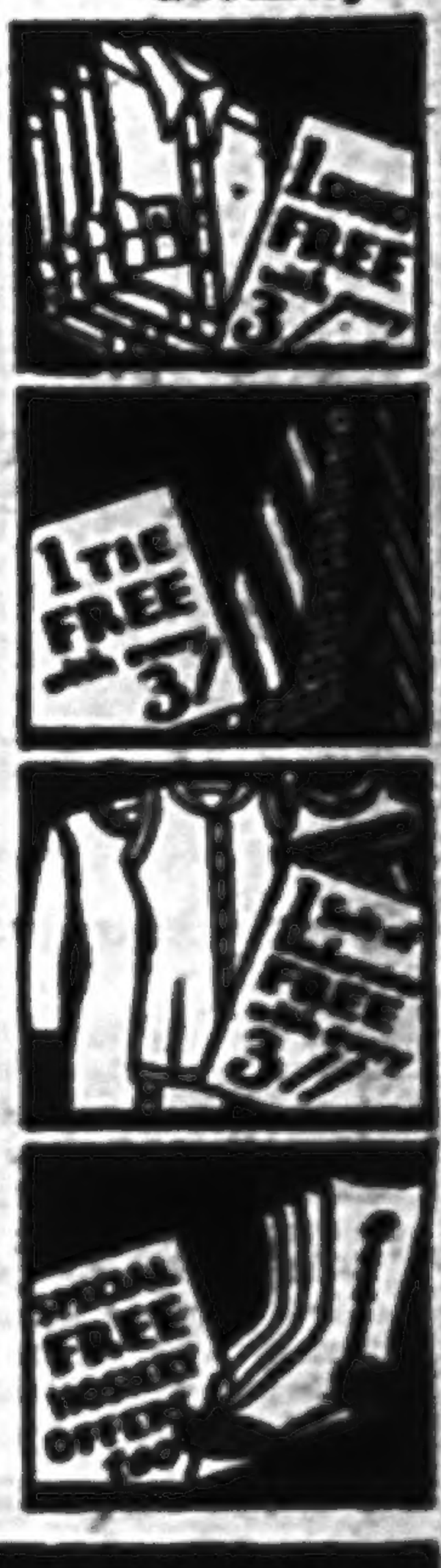

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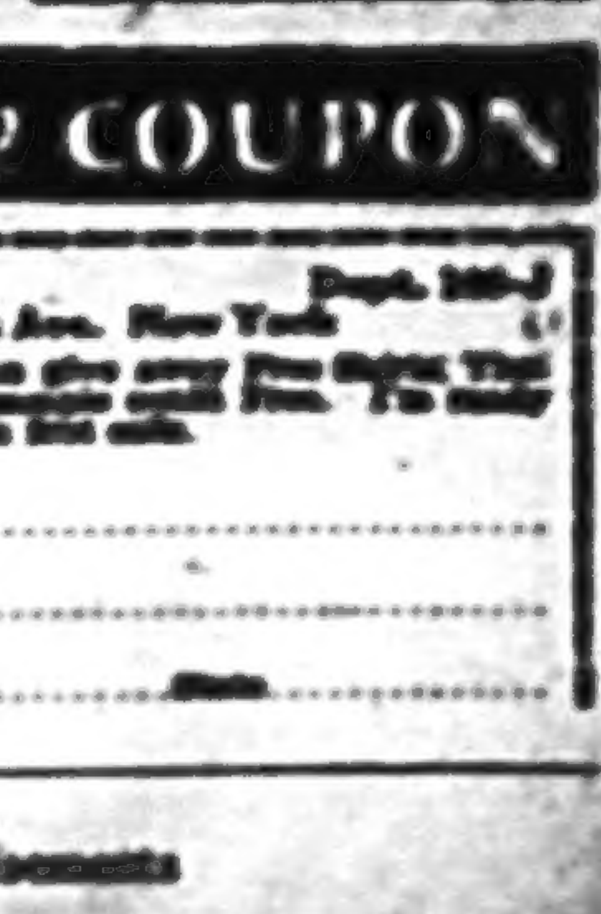

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FOR HALITOSIS AND BODY ODORS

With a roar, the ogreman charged.

B. C. 30,000

By Capt. S. P. Meek

A SCREAM of rage split the darkness. From the side of the fire where the women sat darted Esle, the High Priestess, a bloody bit of liver in her hand. Following her, and snarling like an enraged cat, came one of the maidens of the tribe. The aged hag, Esle, whose duty it was to declare to the tribe the will of Degar Astok, the mighty one who dwelt in the heavens and sent the storms to enforce his will, came to a pause before Uglik, the Chief and tribal Father.

"Una was eating of the man's piece," she shrilled as she held the fragment aloft.

Back in the dim dawn of civilization Anak the Hunter stands in his might before the encroaching Neanderthal man.

Uglik dropped the thigh bone from which he had been ripping the meat in huge chunks. He took the liver from Esie and examined it.

"Bring me my spear!" he roared as he lunged forward and grasped Una by the hair. "One has stolen that which is tabu to her and I will punish her."

Una moaned with fright but attempted no resistance. Uglik grasped his spear and raised it over his head.

"Hold, Father!" came a clear voice from the group of hunters who sat near the chief.

Uglik paused in amazement at the interruption. Anak, the Chief Hunter rose to his feet and made a step forward.

"She stole it not," he said. "Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her."

Uglik released the girl and stared at the hunter in surprise. Anak returned the stare coolly and Uglik raised his throwing-spear threateningly. Anak did not let his gaze wander from the Father's, but his grasp tightened ever so slightly on the sharp flint smiting-stone which he had taken from the skin pouch which dangled from his leather waist belt before he had made his announcement.

"Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her," he repeated slowly. "Anak killed the buck, and half of the liver is, by the law of the tribe, his to dispose of. Does the Father deny the right?"

UGLIK lowered the point of his spear and thought rapidly. Anak's act constituted unheard-of rebellion against his authority. On the other hand, the Chief Hunter was the cleverest tracker of the tribe and a mighty warrior in battle. The tribe of Ugar had lost most of its warriors in their long six-month march north from the fertile valley where the Mediterranean Sea now rolls. Uglik was too wise a leader to waste men on a trivial quarrel, able though he felt himself to kill Anak, should the latter cry the rannag, the duel to the death by which the Father must at any time prove to any challenger, his right to rule.

"It is the right of the killer to dispose of half of the liver of the kill," he conceded. "It is also the right of the stronger to take what he wills from the weaker. To Esie belongs the liver. The girl will not be punished. Anak will join me at meat."

Anak's face flushed momentarily at the arrogant tone of the Father's ruling. He realized, as well as Uglik, what had caused the Father to condone his semi-rebellion. He shrugged his shoulders and sat down beside Uglik.

Uglik ate slowly, looking meditatively at Una as she tore off chunks of the meat with her strong teeth and swallowed them. The girl was about eighteen and in the first flush of womanhood. Her tawny brown skin gleamed like satin in the firelight, which was reflected from her slightly curling masses of black hair. She stood eight inches over five feet and her entire body was built on generous lines, lines of perfect health and almost masculine strength. Anak's eyes followed the direction of Uglik's gaze and he grew thoughtful in turn.

"Is the Father satisfied with the Chief Hunter?" he asked ceremoniously.

"The Father is," replied Uglik in similar vein.

"Then the Chief Hunter has a boon to ask."

"Name it."

"I desire that maiden, Una, be given to me."

"What?"

Uglik could hardly believe his

ears. All of the women of the tribe belonged of immemorial right to the Father. While he might lend one for a time to a favored hunter as a mark of distinction, the suggestion that he completely relinquish his claim to one of them, and a young and handsome one at that, struck him with such astonishment that he was momentarily speechless.

"I desire that the maiden, Una, be given to me," repeated Anak. "She pleases me. I would have her carry my weapons on the march and sleep by my side in the camp."

UGLIK leaped to his feet, spear in hand, but before the Chief Hunter's cool gaze, he wavered again. Men were too scarce to waste, unless it became necessary.

"I will consider the matter," he said shortly. "I may lend her to you for a time, but I will not give her to you. Such is not the law."

"The Father who ruled before you gave women to his favored hunters," replied Anak. "I was the son of such a one."

"And Degar Astok assumed the form of a lion and punished him for his impiety by destroying him," retorted Uglik.

"Then Uglik killed the lion and so became Father," replied Anak, "since none dared challenge the slayer of Degar Astok. Is it not possible that Eale, who was young and who favored Uglik in those days, made a mistake? Despite his death, Degar Astok still has power."

Uglik's face flushed at the hunter's words.

"Degar Astok may be robbed of one body, but he still lives," he answered. "Say no more. I will consider your request."

Anak saluted and strode to the other side of the men's fire. He dropped down beside Invar, the youngest of the hunters. It was on his recommendation that Invar had been initiated into the ranks of manhood a full season before his time. The young hunter looked up with adoration in his eyes.

"This I saved for my friend, Anak," he said proudly as he extended a generous chunk of liver. "Invar will be honored if his friend will eat of the liver of his kill."

Anak took the morsel with thanks and ate it slowly. His thoughts ran to the tall maiden whom he had requested from the Father, and his blood boiled at the way he had been put off. He was half inclined to cry the rannag, but he was not yet ready for the death duel which would determine whether he or Uglik would rule the tribe. There was no other solution, for, while he ruled, the Father's word was law, subject only to the higher law of Degar Astok as given out by the High Priestess. This overlordship was more nominal than actual, for those priestesses who lived long lives were invariably those who found that the will of the Father coincided exactly with the law of Degar Astok. Anak revolved the problem in his mind for a time, but the repletion of raw meat in his stomach was not conducive to protracted thought. Gradually his head slumped forward and he slept sitting. The other hunters followed his example, leaving the youths from ten to seventeen to guard the camp, keep the fires going, and rouse the hunters should need arise.

THE night passed slowly without alarms. Womoo, the lion, roared in the distance, and from near at hand came the coughing laugh of Kena, the jackal, who always prowled around the camp when the tribe fed on meat. Gradually the sky grew lighter. One of the children moaned in his sleep and raised his head. He rose, and

with a word to the youth on guard, trotted off toward the stream which gurgled near the camp. He disappeared in the darkness. Suddenly there came a sudden scream, shut off in mid-note. Hardly had the cry ceased than the hunters were on their feet with spears ready in their hands.

"What is it?" cried Uglik.

"Loda went to the stream to drink," stuttered the guard. "He screamed, and I saw a gray shape run off into the darkness. It ran like Grup, the bear, but it was small."

"Bring fire!" cried Anak.

The youth seized a burning brand and led the way toward the stream. By the light of the torch Anak scrutinized the ground carefully. With a sudden exclamation, he pointed out to Uglik the print of a long and narrow, but unmistakably human, foot in the mud by the river bank. Uglik studied it carefully.

"What think you?" he demanded of Anak.

"It is the mark of man, yet not of our tribe," replied the Chief Hunter. "Such marks have I never seen."

"Wait until Degar Astok sends the light," directed Uglik. "As soon as you can trail, the hunters will go in pursuit."

SLOWLY the light grew brighter. As soon as he could pick out the trail, Anak led the way, Uglik with the warriors and youths following closely. The trail led straight up the valley for a half mile before it turned and followed a branch of the stream which came from a ravine in the valley wall. The hunters went a hundred yards up the ravine following Anak. The Chief Hunter paused and held up his hand. He sniffed the air and then led the way cautiously past a projecting shoulder of rock. On a ledge, half way up the hillside, sat two monstrous things.

They were manlike and yet hardly man. Their bodies were covered with stiff, coarse, gray hair which lengthened into a mane on the head and neck. Their foreheads were low and receding, an impression which was heightened by the enormously developed brow ridges, although the cranial capacity of the creatures was not small, as was evidenced by enormous bulges at the back of their heads. They walked on two legs but with a peculiar slouch, the torso inclined forward from the hips, and their eyes bent perpetually on the ground. Their arms were long and at times they bent forward so much that it appeared almost as though they were going on all fours. A close examination of their hands would have shown that it was impossible for them to hold a needle between the thumb and forefinger.

"Gumor, the gray ape!" cried one of the hunters.

"It is not Gumor," replied Anak, "although they are like his cousins. "See what they eat!"

As the hunters of the Cro-Magnon tribe of Ugar saw the meat which the Neanderthalers were tearing, a cry of wrath broke from them. Uglik stepped forward and raised the war cry of the tribe. The Neanderthalers looked stupidly down at him for a moment. The huge male dropped the meat he was eating and rose, his mane and beard bristling with rage. With a roar, he charged down the slope, a huge flint smiting-stone in either hand.

THE hunters closed up on Uglik. As the attacker came within range, he was saluted with a shower of stones which sprang harmlessly from his huge rounded chest. Uglik hurled his spear. It

pierced the apeman's shoulder but did not make him pause. Other spears were hurled and struck their mark, but without a pause the Neanderthaler came on with howls of rage and pain, bloody froth flying from his lips.

Anak had not thrown his spear, and Invar, who stood beside his hero, had likewise retained his weapon. The apeman came on with a rush. Uglik sprang forward to meet him, but another hunter was directly in the path of the attack. He swung his flint smiting-stone with a will, but his blow was futile. He went down before a sweep of the apeman's arm, his skull crushed to fragments.

Uglik struck at the attacker. The Neanderthaler turned toward him, but as he did so, Anak hurled his spear. At close range, the stone-tipped weapon passed nearly through the apeman. He stopped his rush and began to cough up blood from a pierced lung. Anak seized Invar's spear and sprang to the attack. An unfledged youth who craved distinction, rushed ahead of the Chief Hunter, but his act spelled his doom. One blow of the huge smiting-stone laid him dead. Anak hurled Invar's spear and again his weapon found its mark. The Neanderthaler roared with pain and sank gradually to his knees. Uglik dashed in, knife in hand. He threw himself on the prostrate monster and stabbed him again and again. The blows struck home, but with a last effort the apeman threw off his assailant and struck at him with the huge stone which had already robbed the tribe of two of its members. Before the blow could fall, Samo, one of the hunters, threw himself in the way and took the blow on his arm. The arm bone snapped like a pipestem, but it was the monster's dying effort. With a shudder, he fell back dead.

A FEROCIOUS howl rent the air. With a smiting-stone in each hand, the female charged down at them. She was somewhat smaller than the male, but still a match for any two of the men. Uglik's face paled as he wrenched Invar's spear from the dead male and turned to face her. The howl was repeated from farther up the ravine. Two more males were approaching at a lumbering run, smiting-stones in either hand. Uglik was a brave man, but he was also a cautious leader. He did not care to expose his tribe to almost certain annihilation and he led a wild retreat down the valley. Samo, with his arm hanging limp, bringing up the rear. The Neanderthalers did not follow into the open valley.

Again at the camping place, Uglik called his hunters into council. The situation was grave enough. With the Neanderthalers so near them, it meant eventual annihilation to stay where they were, yet there was no place they could go. They had been driven from their old home by hordes of men who came up from the south. They had fought to retain their ancestral hunting grounds where they had dwelt since the beginning of time, but a series of defeats at the hands of overwhelming numbers had dwindled down the tribe until a migration was necessary. They had followed the migrating game toward the unknown north.

Several times they had tried to stop, but each time they had found the land in possession of other and stronger tribes. Their men had been killed and their women stolen until they again took up their march to the north. From the hundred that had formerly called Uglik "Father," there now remained only a score of women and children, a half dozen youths, and five able-bodied hunters, besides Uglik.

South, they dared not go. North, there lay unknown horrors. West lay the raging sea. East, the Neanderthalers blocked the way.

THE council broke up with no action decided on. Faced with the alternatives of moving or staying, there seemed to be little choice. Only death faced them, whichever way they turned. Uglik posted guards about the camp and announced that he would retire and consult with Degar Astok as to their future course.

As he disappeared into the woods, Esle sidled up to Anak.

"It seems that Degar Astok no longer loves Uglik," she said slyly. "Does not the Chief Hunter agree with me?"

Anak looked at the withered hag coldly.

"Who am I to tell his Priestess whom Degar Astok loves?" he asked. "You are his voice and should know."

"True, Anak, I am his voice, and the God loves me," she went on, "yet it may be that men do not always love me. Uglik thinks that I have given him false counsel and he is ready for a new Priestess to announce the will of Degar Astok to him. He believes that a new and younger Priestess would bring back the favor of the God."

"What is that to me?" asked Anak.

"You desire the maiden, Una?"

"And if I do?"

"You are not to have her. Uglik will never grant your request. Already he plans to make her the High Priestess, should an accident happen to me."

Anak started. If Esle spoke the truth, it ended his chances of having Una. All women were tabu to all save the Father, but the High Priestess was doubly sacred.

"What am I to do?" he demanded.

Esle smiled slyly.

"I was the Voice of the God before Uglik was Father," she said in a low voice, "and I would be so after he is gone. Cry you ranag on him. I know many things, and I will cast a spell on him so that victory will be easy for you. Then will you be Father. The maiden Una will be yours, and old Esle will remain the High Priestess."

"To give me false counsel as you have Uglik, and in time to plot my overthrow and death with another," said Anak sternly. "No, woman or devil, whichever you are, I want no help of yours. If I ever cry ranag on Uglik, I will defeat him by my strength or not at all. If I win to be Father, be assured that an 'accident' will happen to you shortly."

ESLE frothed at the mouth with rage.

"You shall never have the maiden!" she screamed. "Rather will I kill her than that you shall have her. It was in my mind to make you Chief and to lead you from this trap that Uglik had brought you into, but you have sealed your doom and here. I go to prepare a curse."

She turned to depart, but Anak grasped her by the arm.

"Listen, woman," he said sternly as he raised his spear, "it is in my mind to kill you and make an end of your evil plottings."

"Spare me! Spare me, noble Anak!" shrieked the hag, dropping to her knees as the flint point of Anak's spear hovered over her. "I will not harm her nor you, either. I will soften Uglik's heart toward you and make him give you the maiden. I will declare it is the will of the God."

Anak lowered the spear.

"As long as Una is safe, your life is spared," he said grimly; "but pray to Degar Astok to keep her

safe. Should any harm befall her, your life will answer for it."

"I will weave spells to guard her from harm, Anak," she cried eagerly. "Only let me live, brave hunter!"

Anak spurned her contemptuously from him. The hag scuttled away and took the path into the woods which Uglik had taken earlier. Later in the day she returned with the Father. Uglik announced briefly that it was the will of Degar Astok that they remain at their present camping place.

THEN began a time of horror for the children of the tribe. If one of them strayed for even a short distance from the circle of the camp fire at night, there came a scream from the darkness and the tribe would mourn another lost member. The tales of man-eating giants and ogres which even yet haunt the dreams of childhood have descended to us through the ages from those grim times when the race of men learned the lesson of fear of the dark that they are now slowly and painfully unlearning.

Anak did not renew his request for Una. He knew from her smiles that the maiden was more than willing to become his property, but in the face of their daily peril, he was not willing to precipitate a crisis which might easily cost the tribe most or all of their few remaining warriors. He kept a sharp watch on Eale and on Uglik, but neither the High Priestess nor the Father seemed to notice the girl.

As time went on, the Neanderthalers lost their fear of the fire and grew bolder. Their gray shapes could be seen prowling around at night, just outside the protecting circle of light. The climax came at last. There was a scream in the night. A howl of triumph came from the darkness. The quickly aroused hunters could see nothing at which to cast their spears.

"Who is missing?" demanded Uglik as the hunters returned empty handed.

"The maiden, Una," cried Eale shrilly.

Anak rushed at her, spear in hand.

"Unsay those words, hag of evil omen!" he roared. "Where have you hidden her?"

"Ask of the cousins of Gumor," she replied as she ducked behind the protecting frame of Uglik. "They have taken her from us."

Anak dropped his spear and buried his face in his hands. When he raised his head again, resolution showed in his handsome face.

"Prepare spears and throwing stones," he cried. "To-morrow we attack the cousins of Gumor. Either they or we shall be no more when the night falls again."

A murmur of dissent went around the camp. Uglik sprang to his feet.

"What means the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar?" he demanded.

"I mean that to-morrow we settle for all time who rules in this valley, the tribe of Ugar or the cousins of Gumor."

"And has the Father no voice in the council of the tribe?"

"We have come to the end," replied Anak. "If we do not strike now, soon we will be too weak to strike. To-morrow we attack!"

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar," replied Uglik with a dangerous note in his voice. "No one gives orders here except me. On you, Anak, the Chief Hunter that was, I place the word of death! Slay him!"

The hunters raised their spears doubtfully. Anak raised his, ready to cast it at Uglik. Before a blow could be struck, a figure sprang across the fire and took a stand, back to back with Anak.

"Who strikes my friend, strikes me!" cried Invar.

UGLIK gave a gasp at this fresh defection from his authority. He roared to the hunters to strike. The three hunters remaining to the tribe advanced half heartedly. None of them cared to face Anak; and Invar, young as he was, had already proven himself a mighty warrior. Uglik shouldered them aside with a roar of wrath. Before he could attack, Anak's cry stopped him.

"Hold, Uglik!" cried the Chief Hunter. "If you attack, the tribe will lose most or all of its hunters. You have put the death word on me, as is your right. I go now against the cousins of Gumor, and that, I think, is death. Let me go in peace and with weapons. Before they tear me limb from limb, at least one of them will not be alive."

"And I go with Anak!" cried Invar. "More than one of the cousins of Gumor will know that the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar and his friend have visited their home."

Uglik paused. No trace of fear entered his heart, but the wily politician saw the force of Anak's argument. He would gain doubly by the course that the hunter had proposed.

"Go in peace, and with weapons," he said as he lowered his spear. "Eale will take your weapons and make spells over them that will increase their might. At dawn you shall go. The word of death is on you, so come not back to the tribe again. Once you leave the camp, you are outlaw."

"So be it!" replied Anak.

Shortly before the dawn, Eale crept to Anak's side.

"I've wrought spells over your weapons, Chief Hunter," she said softly, "and over those of your companion. Remember this when the cousins of Gumor attack you."

"I will, bag of evil," said Anak grimly. "Better will it be for you that we never return."

"Why leave?" came Eale's insinuating voice. "I am still ready to help you. Cry ranag on Uglik in the morning. Your weapons have had my attention and his have not. That alone would decide the fight. Slay him and the warriors of the tribe will fight at your back. I know spells, and mayhap, they will prevail even against the cousins of Gumor."

"I go but for vengeance, Eale," said Anak wearily. "With Una gone, I have no desire to live."

"There are other maidens who are fair, Anak, and when you are Father you will have them all."

"Leave me, Eale," said Anak shortly. "I desire none but Una."

"And may the cousins of Gumor crack your bones between their teeth," she hissed venomously as she slipped away into the darkness.

AS the sun rose above the horizon, Anak and Invar took their way up the valley. Each carried three flint-tipped throwing spears, while a good supply of flint throwing stones were in their skin pouches. Half a mile from camp, Anak turned to his companion.

"I thank you for coming with me," he said, his hand on Invar's shoulder. "It is the deed of a brave man."

Invar flushed and looked down.

"The least that I can do is to go to Degar Astok with my friend," he said.

"It is the deed of a brave man, yet I think we are not yet ripe to die."

"We go against the cousins of Gumor, do we not?" asked the lad.

"We do."

"And is that not death?"

"Mayhap, and yet, I have a plan. We may live."

"How can we two expect to do what all the tribe of Ugar dare not try?"

"The tribe of Ugar, or a dozen

tribes of Ugar, could not conquer with Uglik leading them," replied Anak, "yet we two may do so. Hark now to my plan. Like Gumor, the gray ape, his cousins walk ever with their eyes cast down. While we have been hunting, I have been spying on them in their home. Never have I seen one look up, and it may be that they cannot. Above or on a level with us, they can easily kill us. If we stand on the rocks above them, they cannot see us and will be at our mercy. They can run as fast as we on level ground, but going uphill, we will leave them as Gumo, the deer, leaves Kesa. They are few in number; I have watched and seen but two hunters and three females. It is my plan to scale the cliffs and watch them below us. When the time is ripe, we will launch our throwing spears. If we fail to make a kill, we will bound up the hill and escape to strike again."

Invar looked with admiration at his leader. The habit of connected thought and reasoning was new in the world in those days. Such boldness of conception as was shown by Anak's plan was a thing for marvel. As the ramifications of the plan seeped into Invar's brain, his face glowed with enthusiasm.

"Anak should be Father of the tribe of Ugar!" he cried.

"That may yet come to pass," replied Anak enigmatically. "If I kill Uglik, however, it will be to avenge Una, not to win the chieftainship. Now keep silence, for here is the home of the cousins of Gumor."

CAUTIOUSLY the two hunters passed the mouth of the ravine and climbed the slopes of the valley. Once on the level ground, they moved to the edge of the ravine and looked down into it. Nothing could be seen moving. Anak led the way a hundred yards farther up the ravine.

"Below us is a cave where dwell two," he whispered. "Make ready your spear while I sound the challenge."

He raised his voice in a wild howl of challenge. For a moment there was silence. Then from the ravine came a hoarse rumbling bellow. An enormous male made his appearance, his mane and beard bristling with rage. He darted his eyes hither and thither, seeking the source of the challenge. Again a hoarse roar came from his broad, thick lips. As it rose to a crescendo, Anak hurled his spear.

His aim was true. The point struck the Neanderthaler at the junction of his neck and shoulder. As it struck, the haft flew from the spear and bounded down the slope. The first point made only a surface wound.

The apeman roared with pain and rage. Still he did not see his enemies. With careful aim, Invar launched his weapon. The stone-tipped spear struck the giant's groin, but the haft broke and the head was barely buried in the flesh. The Neanderthaler pricked up his pointed, lobeless ears, and located the source of the shout. By bending back his torso, he looked upward. With a roar of rage he started up the slope, a huge flint cutting-stone grasped in each hairy paw.

Anak and Invar dashed up the slope ahead of him. The keenness of the Chief Hunter's powers of observation was attested by the fact that they easily increased their distance from their pursuer. As they ran, Invar's foot dislodged a boulder which thundered down the slope. The Neanderthaler did not see it coming until it was too late to dodge. The stone took him full in the chest and he rolled down the slope, a shower of smaller stones going with him.

He crashed against a tree. With

shouts of triumph, Anak and Invar bounded down the slope. The Neanderthaler was dying, his chest crushed in. Invar raised a spear and drove it at his heart. The weapon struck fair, but again the head of the spear came off the shaft. A sudden thought illuminated Anak's brain.

"Eole!" he cried in rage. "She had our weapons last night!"

HE studied the two spears remaining in his hand. Each of them had the hide lashing which bound the head to the haft cut through. The weapons were useless.

Invar's face paled. From up the slope a roar assailed their ears. The female was rushing down at them, smiting-stones in hand.

"Fly, Invar!" cried Anak. "Run up the slope and throw down stones at her. I will hold her for a moment."

"Invar stays with his friend!" cried the boy stubbornly as he gripped his useless throwing-spear.

"Run up the slope!" stormed Anak. "It is our only chance. Remember how the male died!"

Slowly the idea penetrated Invar's brain. With a shout he dashed away. He circled the oncoming female and got above her. Anak hurled one of his crippled spears. It struck her full in the chest, but made only a flesh wound as the handle dropped away. The female roared with rage and hurled herself at the hunter. Anak leaped to one side and ran for dear life. The clumsy female checked her rush and turned after him. He rapidly gained on her. A shout from above reached him.

"Run to your left, Anak!"

The hunter swerved sharply to his left. Invar threw his shoulder against a huge boulder on the slope. The stone rocked but did not fall. Again the lad exerted himself until his muscles cracked under the strain. The boulder tottered for a moment and then rolled down the slope, gathering momentum as it rolled. It was deflected from the direct line of the female's attack, but a smaller stone it dislodged struck her on the shoulder and knocked her from her feet.

"More stones, Invar!" cried Anak.

THE two exerted themselves and an avalanche of rocks thundered down the slope. The female strove to rise, but she was overwhelmed. Down the slope rushed the two hunters, intent on finishing her with their smiting-stones and knives. She lay in a twisted heap, whimpering plaintively. Invar's knife found her heart, and she sank back dead.

"Well struck, Invar!" cried Anak. "Would that we had spears. Others of the cousins of Gumor are coming."

Bellowing roars came from higher up the ravine. The two hunters bounded back up the slope. Down the ravine came another female, followed by a fourteen year old boy. Contemptuous of their assailants, the hunters betrayed their whereabouts with shouts. The female accepted the challenge and climbed heavily up the slope toward them, the boy trailing her and spying her cries with shrill shouts.

The hunters allowed her to approach to within a few yards before they threw their combined weight on a huge mass of rock. The boulder gave and thundered down the slope. It brushed past the female but did not strike her.

"Higher up and try again, Invar!" cried the Chief Hunter.

They bounded up the slope. Anak paused and hurled a flint throwing-stone with deadly aim. It struck the female a glancing blow on the face, tearing the flesh from one of the prominent brow ridges. She stopped,

momentarily blinded. Invar raised a rock high above his head with both hands and cast it at her. It struck her on the chest and she fell backwards. Again Anak's strategy was successful and an avalanche of rolled rocks overwhelmed her. The boy turned to fly, but the fleet-footed Invar overtook him and the knives of the two hunters quickly put an end to his career.

As they beat over his dead body, a shrill scream rose on the air. It was not the voice of an apeman, or an apewoman, but held a human quality. The hunters straightened up and sought the source of it. Again came the scream. From the mouth of a cave above them bounded a girl. She won momentarily to freedom, but a huge Neanderthal male followed her from the cave. His hairy arm seized and dragged her back.

"Una!" cried Invar and Anak in one voice.

FORGOTTEN were strategy and tactics. Anak bounded up the slope, Invar at his heels. Into the mouth of the cave they charged. The huge male dropped the girl and faced them with a growl. Anak hurled a throwing-stone, but his aim was poor. It rebounded harmlessly from the great arched chest of the Neanderthaler. With a roar, the apeman charged.

The hunter sidestepped the rush and swung his smiting-stone. The blow was deflected by the upraised arm of the apeman and fell on his shoulder. Invar hurled a throwing-stone which found the monster's face and made him pause. The apeman recovered himself and rushed at the youth. The boy met him, smiting-stone in hand, but one swing of the heavier flint broke through his guard and stretched him senseless on the floor, blood flowing from a gash in his head.

Anak hurled another throwing-stone which caught the apeman on the back of the head, dazing him. With a shout, Anak closed. The effects of the blow had been only momentary and the Neanderthaler met his rush with both his stones swinging. One of them tore a long gash down Anak's back while the other laid open his thigh. The apeman dropped his stones and wound his long hairy arms about the hunter's body. Anak threw himself back and the two rolled on the floor, the apeman striving to crush the life out of his slighter opponent, while Anak smote futilely with his smiting-stone at the hairy body. Slowly, the hunter's ribs gave under the pressure. Spots of fire danced before his eyes. He strove valiantly, but his muscles were as a child's, compared to the enormous development of his opponent. With a gasp, his body went limp.

UNA had watched the struggle with horror-stricken eyes. As the apeman's grip tightened about Anak's body, she gave a low moan. Her gaze fell on the discarded smiting-stones of the Neanderthaler. She sprang forward and lifted one in both hands. The apeman threw back his head to give a roar of victory. The note never issued from his throat. The huge flint which he had chipped patiently to a sharp edge, struck him on the back of the head. With a gasp and a convulsive shudder, the apeman rolled over, his skull crushed in.

Invar slowly recovered consciousness, and now sat up. He looked dully at the dead body of the Neanderthaler. Beside it, Anak lay in a pool of blood. He staggered to his feet, asking dully:

"Is Anak with Degar Antok?"

"Not yet," replied Una. "Help me to stop the flow of his blood."

"He said there were five of the cousins of Gemor," said the boy as he looked around apprehensively. "We have slain but four."

Una pointed toward the ravine.

"The other lies there," she said. "This one slew his mate an hour gone. I think he designed me to take her place."

Fever took Anak, and for three days he hovered between life and death. Then he slept and woke conscious, although his strength was badly sapped by the fever. There was no lack of food, for geese was plentiful and Invar had found and mended the throwing-spears which Eale had tempered with. Slowly Anak recovered his strength. A month after the fight he stretched his muscles and announced himself as well.

"I return to-day to the tribe of Ugar," he announced.

"Can you return?" asked Invar doubtfully. "Remember the word of death."

"That, let Uglik answer," replied Anak. "In peace or in war, I will return. Soon the winter will come and here are warm caves and geese in plenty. Here shall the tribe make a home."

"Where you go, there go I," exclaimed Invar.

"And I likewise," said Una.

"Una will stay here until we return," replied Anak in a tone which brooked no argument.

THE girl pouted, but a sharp word from Anak settled the matter. Throwing-spear and smiting-stone in hand, the two hunters approached the camping place of Uglik's tribe. They were within a hundred yards before they were seen. Eale set up a shrill cry.

"Here come those on whom the Father passed the death word. Slay, oh, hunters!"

Anak raised his hand and made the sign of peace.

"Wait before you attack two such as we," he said. "We are bearers of good tidings. By our hands, the cousins of Gumor have died. Think you, do you care to attack two such as we?"

The hunters looked at one another doubtfully.

"He lies!" shrilled Eale.

"We do not lie!" retorted Anak. "Their bones, picked clean by Kena, lie in their ravine. We come in peace to lead you to their home. There are warm caves and geese in plenty. We will rejoin the tribe if the Father will remove the death word. Otherwise, attack us if you dare, and the tribe of Ugar will join the cousins of Gumor."

Uglik's face plainly showed hesitation.

"The death word has been passed," he said doubtfully. "It can be withdrawn only by a sacrifice to Degar Astak."

"We two have offered five of the cousins of Gumor, and a boy. Is that not enough?"

"It must be a human sacrifice!" cried Eale.

"Then, bag of evil omen, traitor to Uglik, attempted slayer of Invar and me, I offer you!" cried Anak furiously, his spear raised.

"Sacrilege!" she shrilled, darting behind Uglik. "Slay the defiler of the God!"

"What mean these charges, Anak?" asked Uglik darkly.

"Eale tempered with our spears, which you ordered her to straighten for the battle with the cousins of Gumor," said Anak. "They broke in our hands. With only smiting-stones and knives, we overcame them. Further, she tried to plot with me to kill you and take your place."

"He lies!" cried Eale in a quavering voice. Uglik turned a black face on her.

"ENOUGH!" he roared. "The sacrifice is sufficient. I withdraw the death word. Anak, the cause of dissension between us is gone. Rejoin the tribe in peace."

"I bow to the Father," replied Anak, suiting his action to his word. "The tribe of Ugar has gained three members."

"Three?" asked Uglik.

"The maiden, Una, was not slain, but borne away alive by the cousins of Gumor. I have rescued her and she waits in the valley of plenty."

"Then Degar Astok was right when he told me he should have a new High Priestess," said Uglik, licking his lips. "She shall come to my cave and take the place of that worn-out hag, Eale."

"She will dwell in mine," said Anak shortly. "I have taken her for mine and I will not give her up."

"The word of the Father is the law of the tribe," said Uglik.

"That is true. I ask that the maiden whom I have taken in war be given to me in peace."

"The maiden, Una, dwells in the Father's cave!" said Uglik.

"Then cry I ranag on you, Uglik, the Father!" cried Anak. "I challenge you to the fight to death, which you may not refuse and continue to rule."

"And on you I pass the death word!" shouted Uglik. "Hunters—"

"The Father may not pass the death word on one who has cried ranag," retorted Anak. "Such is the law!"

"Such is the law!" echoed the hunters, glad of an excuse not to attack the two hunters of whose prowess they knew so much.

Uglik looked from one group to the other.

"When the sun starts to rest, the ranag will be fought," he answered. "When I have slain this traitor, Una becomes High Priestess. Hunters, bind the hag, Eale, that she may not escape. Anak, lead the way to the valley of plenty."

PACKING up was a simple matter for the tribe of Ugar. In five minutes they were following Anak to the valley of the Neanderthalers. When they arrived, Uglik picked out the largest of the caves, and told the hunters to choose their own. In a few minutes the tribe was established in their new home. Eale was released from her bonds, for it was essential that the High Priestess of Degar Astok prepare the ground for the ranag.

Anak and Invar walked slowly up to the cave where Una waited.

"Uglik is a mighty warrior," said Invar doubtfully.

"So is Anak," was the reply. "Further, I have a plan."

"Then are Uglik's days numbered," replied Invar with delight. "Tell me what I am to do to aid you."

"When we get to the cave, you may cut off my hair and beard."

Invar started back aghast.

"Your strength will go with it," he protested. "The glory of the warrior is his beard."

"I do not believe it," said Anak. "By cutting it, I will rob Uglik of a handhold he could use to my downfall. Fear not, I know what I am doing."

With a flint knife, Invar slowly and painfully hacked off Anak's long hair and beard. When the operation was over, Anak smeared himself plentifully with the fat of a wild pig which had fallen to one of Invar's spears the day before. When he was ready, he threw himself down to sleep. When he had dropped off to slumber, Una rose. She took the liver of the pig from the back of the cave and approached the doorway.

"Where go you, Una?" demanded Invar.

"I take this to the Father that he may strengthen himself for the ranag," she said enigmatically. "Should not the best be given to the Father?"

Invar's head tightened on his throwing spear.

"Minded am I to slay you," he said darkly.

"And fight to the death with Anak when he awakens? Listen, oh, fool, if the Father eats greatly, he will be slow and Anak may slay him with ease."

A light of admiration flashed into Invar's eyes.

"It is well thought," he said.

WITH a swift glance around, Una took from her girdle a tiny skin packet. She opened it and displayed a brown powder.

"This, Esle gave me," she whispered. "She said that Uglik had threatened her death and she wished Anak to kill him. If I give Anak this, Degar Astok would make him strong."

"Why did you not do so?"

"Because I am a woman, and I know a woman's heart. It would have the opposite effect. I will rub it into the liver I give to Uglik."

With the aid of the women, Esle laid out a rough oval on the ground where the two combatants were to meet. Throwing-stones and spears were not allowed in rannag, the two combatants fighting their duel with smiting-stones and flint knives only. At the appointed hour, the two combatants appeared, stripped to their loin-clothes only. The Father was hideous with streaks of paint, red, yellow, white, and black. Anak glistened from his coat of grease, but his skin was bare of ornament.

The two combatants took their places, while around the fighting ground gathered the hunters and youths, throwing spears in hand. Their privilege and duty it was to slay either of the fighters who fled or who was forced out of the ring. Esle intoned a long prayer to Degar Astok. The word for combat was given. The two men approached each other cautiously. The Father was confident in his strength, but he felt heavy and lethargic. Anak was clear-eyed and alert, ready to take advantage of any opening offered him.

The two men circled, wary as great jungle cats. Anak, suddenly ducked his head and rubbed his eyes. With a roar of triumph, Uglik charged.

Outside the ring, there was a commotion. A woman's scream rent the air. Invar leaped to Una's side, to find her wrestling with Esle.

"Kill her, Invar!" shrieked the girl. "She tried to cast a spell on Anak."

The young hunter forced open the High Priestess' hand. In it was grasped a bit of shiny quartz with which she had reflected the sun into the hunter's eyes. With upraised hand, he struck her to the ground.

"She shall be judged after the rannag," he said. "Take you this spear, Una, and drive it through her if she moves."

The girl took the spear. Invar returned to watch the fight. Anak had sidestepped the first rush of the Father and his smiting-stone had bit heavily into Uglik's shoulder. Uglik had whirled and charged again. Anak made as if to leap to one side. As Uglik changed his direction to meet him, Anak swayed back. Again his smiting-stone bit heavily into the Father's side. With a cry of pain, Uglik paused and changed his tactics. He approached cautiously, ready to leap to either side. Farther and farther Anak retreated until the hunters at the end of the oval raised their spears in anticipation. Then Anak charged.

Uglik was taken by surprise. His blow glanced off Anak's upraised stone while an upward sweep of the weapon took him in the neck. He dropped his stone and threw his arms around Anak's body. Well had Anak planned when he greased his body, for Uglik's grip failed.

Anak shook him loose and struck again. Once more Uglik grasped him, and this time threw him heavily to the ground. Again the grease made his hold slip. Anak struggled to his feet, but it was evident that the fall had hurt him.

UGLIK followed up his advantage. He warded off the blow of the hunter's stone and again flung him to earth. Anak dropped his stone.

Uglik's hands fastened on the hunter's throat, and mercilessly he banged Anak's head on the rocky ground. Anak wound his mighty legs about the Father's middle. Silently they put forth their strength. Uglik's hold was the more deadly, and slowly the hunter weakened.

"The Father kills!" screamed Eale.

She strove to rise to her feet, but Una had her orders from Invar. She pressed home the spear. With a sob, Eale fell back.

Anak's tongue began to protrude from his mouth and his eyes swelled. An expression of triumph spread over Uglik's face, which suddenly changed to one of amazement, and then to pain and fear.

As they rolled over, Anak had felt something pierce his leg. The pain was nothing, but it persisted. As his consciousness slipped away, only that one feeling remained. He reached down to his leg. Thrust deep into his thigh was a knife-like sliver of flint. With a supreme effort, he rallied his failing consciousness and grasped it. The Father's chest was directly over him. With his last conscious effort, he thrust upward with the fragment of flint. His aim was true. Uglik suddenly released his hold and raised himself to his knees, his hands plucking at his chest. For a moment he swayed forward and back. Then, with a cry, he pitched forward, blood gushing from his chest over the unconscious hunter.

ANAK recovered consciousness to find his opponent lying dead before him, the sliver of flint buried in his heart. He staggered to his feet and tried to speak. His vocal cords refused to act and he massaged his throat gently.

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar by right of rasag," he said hoarsely. "Do any challenge the right?"

There was no answer. Anak stepped to Una's side.

"Uglik spoke truth when he said that Una would be High Priestess of Degar Astok," he said. "This I now proclaim her. You, Eale, stripped of your office, shall do menial tasks for all who will until death claims you. If your homage wavers, death will not be long.

"Lo, I make a new law for the tribe. No longer shall all the women belong to the Father, but to those to whom the Father awards them. To each hunter, I now give one woman. He shall take her to his cave and hunt for her. She shall obey him and no other. The others shall live in a woman's cave, and shall be tabu until they are chosen by one who has no woman, or until a hunter desires more than one woman to chip his flints and dress his skins. Hunters, choose your women and take up caves. Here stays the tribe of Ugar forever, and we will allow no others in the valley."

Followed by Una he strode toward the Father's cave. Below the hunters and the women eyed one another a trifle fearfully. At last Invar stepped forward and grasped one of them by the arm.

"Come to my cave!" he ordered.

The woman followed him submissively.

The Finding of Haldgren

A Complete Novelette

By Charles Willard Diffin

CHAPTER I

SOS

THE venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale had been speaking. He paused now to look out over the sea of faces that filled the great hall in serried waves. He half turned that he might let his eyes pass over the massed company on the platform with him. The Stratosphere Control Board — and they had called in their representatives from the far corners of Earth to hear the memorable words of this aged man.

Chet Ballard answers the pinpoint of light that from the craggy desolation of the moon stabs out man's old call for help.

From the waiting audience came no slightest sound; the men

and women were as silent as that other audience listening and watching in every hamlet of the world, wherever radio and television reached. Again the figure of the President was drawn erect; the scanty, white hair was thrown back from his forehead; he was speaking:

". . . And this vast development has come within the memory of one man. I, speaking to you here in this year of 1974, have seen it all come to pass. And now I am overwhelmed with the wonder of it, even as I was when those two Americans first flew at Kittyhawk.

"I, myself, saw that. I saw with these eyes the first crude engine-bearing kites; I saw them from 1914 to 1918 tempered and perfected in the furnace of war; I saw the

The beasts fell into the pit beyond; their screams rang horribly as they fell.

coming of detonite and the beginning of our air-transport of to-day. And always I have seen brave men—men who smiled grimly as they took those first crude controls in their hands; who laughed and waved to us as they took off in the 'flying coffins' of the great war; who had the courage to dare the unknown dangers of the high levels and who first threw their ships through the Repelling Area and blazed the air-trails of a new world.

"And to-day I, who have seen all this, stand before you and say: Thank God that the spirit of brave men goes on!"

"IT has never ended—that adventurer strain—that race of Viking men. We have two of them here to-night. The whole world is pausing this instant wherever men are on land or water or air to do honor to these two.

"They do not know why they are here. They have been summoned by the Stratosphere Control Board which has delegated to me the honor of making the announcement."

The tall figure was commandingly erect; for an instant the fire of youth had returned to him.

"Walter Harkness!" he called. "Chester Bullard! Stand forth that the eyes of the world may see!"

Two men arose from among the members of the Board and came hesitantly forward. Strongly contrasting was the darkly handsome face of Harkness, man of wealth and Pilot of the Second Class, and the no less pleasing features of Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World. For Bullard's curling hair was as golden as the triple star upon his chest that proclaimed his standing to the world and all the air above.

The speaker was facing them; he turned away for a moment that he might bow to a girl who was still seated next to the chair where Walt Harkness had been.

"To Mrs. Harkness," he said, "who, until one month ago, was Mademoiselle Delacouer of our own beloved France, I shall have something further to say. She, too, has been summoned by the Board, but, for now, I address these two."

AGAIN he was facing the two men; and now he was speaking directly to them:

"Pilot Harkness and Master Pilot Bullard, for you the world has been forced to create a new honor, a new mark of the world's esteem. For you two have done what never men have done before. We who have preceded you have subdued the air; but you, gentlemen, you—the first of all created beings to do so—have conquered space.

"And to you, because of your courage; because of your dauntless pioneer spirit; because of the unconquerable will that drove you and the inventive genius that made it possible—because all these have set you above us more ordinary men, since they have made you the first men to fly through space—it is my privilege now to show you the honor in which you are held by the whole world."

The firm voice quavered; for a moment the old hands trembled as they lifted a blazing gem from its velvet case.

"Chester Bullard, Master Pilot, on behalf of the Stratosphere Control Board I bestow upon you—"

"Stop!"

EVERY radiophone in the world must have echoed that sharp command; every television screen must have shown to a breathless audience the figure whose blond hair was awry, whose lean face was afire with protest, as Chet Bullard sprang forward with upraised hand.

"You're wrong — dead wrong! You're making a mistake. I can't accept that!"

The master pilot's voice was raised in earnest protest. He seemed, for the moment, unaware of the thousands of eyes that were upon him; heedless of the gasp of amazement that swept sibilantly over the vast audience like a hissing wave breaking upon the beach. And then his face flushed scarlet, though his eyes still held steadily upon the startled countenance of the man who stood transfixed, while the jewel in his hand took the light of the nitron illuminators above and shot it back in a glory of rainbow hues.

From the seated group on the platform a man came forward. Commander of the Air, this iron-gray man; he was head of the Stratosphere Control Board, supreme authority on all matters that concerned the air levels of the whole world; Commander-in-Chief of all men who laid hands on the controls of a ship. He spoke quietly now, and Chet Bullard, at his first word, snapped instantly to salute, then stood silently waiting.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the voice of authority. The voice seemed soft, almost gentle, yet each syllable carried throughout the hall with an unmistakable hint of the hardness of a steelite shell beneath the words.

"The eyes of the world are upon us here; the whole world is gathered to do you honor. Is it possible that you are refusing that which we offer? Why? You will speak, please!"

And Chet Bullard, standing stiffly at attention before his commander, spoke in a tone rendered almost boyish by embarrassment.

"I CAN'T accept, sir. Pilot Harkness will bear me out in this. You would decorate us for being the first to navigate space; but we are not the first."

"Continue!" ordered the quiet voice as Chet paused. "You refer to Haldgren, probably."

"To Pilot Haldgren, sir."

"This is absurd! Haldgren was lost. It is supposed that he fell back into the sea, or struck some untraveled part of Earth."

"I have checked over his data, sir. It is my opinion that he did not fall; his figures indicate that he must have thrown his ship beyond the gravitational influence of Earth."

The Commander eyed the master pilot coldly. "And because you *think* that your conclusions are more accurate than those of my own investigating committee, you refuse this honor!

"Attention!" he snapped sharply. "The entire Service of Air is being rendered ridiculous by your conduct! I command you to accept this decoration."

"You are exceeding your authority, sir. I refuse!"

Suddenly the frozen quiet of the Commander's face was flushed red with rage. "Give me that insignia!" he demanded, and pointed to the triple star on Chet Bullard's breast. "Your commission is revoked!"

TO the last breathless spectator in the farthest end of the great hall the white pallor of Chet Bullard's face must have been apparent. One hand moved toward the emblem on his blouse, the cherished triple star of a master pilot of the World; then the hand paused.

"I have still another reason for believing Haldgren is alive," he said in a cold and carefully emotionless voice. "Are you interested in hearing it?"

"Speak!" ordered the Commander.

Chet Bullard, still wearing the triple star, crossed quickly to a phone panel in the speaker's stand

at one side of the stage. He jerked out an instrument. The buzz of excited whispering that had swept the audience gave place to utter silence. Each quiet, incisive word that Chet spoke was clearly heard. He gave his call number.

"Bullard; Master Pilot, First Class; Number U. S. 1; calling Doctor Roche at Allied Observatory, Mount Everest. Micro-wave, please, and connect through for telefoto-projection."

A few breathless seconds passed, while Chet aimed an instrument of gleaming chromium and glass, whose cable connections vanished in the phone panel recess. He focused it upon an artificially darkened screen above and behind the grouped figures on the stage. Then:

"Doctor Roche?" Chet queried.

And, before the whole audience, the dark screen came to life to show a clear-cut picture of a man who sat at a telescope; whose hand held a radiophone; and who glanced up frowningly and said: "Yes, this is Doctor Roche."

Chet's response was immediate.

"Bullard speaking; Chet Bullard, at New York. When I was in your observatory yesterday, Doctor, you said that you had seen flashes of light on the Moon. You remember that, don't you? You saw them some months ago while I was on the Dark Moon."

THE man in that distant observatory was no longer scowling at this interruption of his work. His smile was echoed by the cordial tone of his voice that rang clearly through the great hall.

"Correct, Mr. Bullard. An observer at our two hundred-inch reflector reported them on two successive nights. They were inside the crater of Hercules."

From his place at the center of the stage the waiting Commander of Air protested:

"Come—come! We know all about that, Bullard. Are you trying to say—"

The voice of the astronomer was speaking again:

"You will no doubt be interested to know that the lights occurred again yesterday at about this time. . . . Let me see if they are on now. I will have the two hundred-inch instrument used as before, and will show you what we see.

"Watch your screen, but don't expect to find any substantiation of your wild theory that these lights have a human origin." He laughed softly. "No atmosphere to speak of there, you know; we have determined that very definitely."

On the screen the picture of the smiling man flashed off; it was replaced by an unflickering darkness that came abruptly into softly shaded light. There was an expanse of volcanic terrain and a round orifice of tremendous size, where the sunlight cast black shadows. Other shaded portions about were like rocky, broken ground.

TO Chet, staring at the strange conformation, came the quick sense of hanging above that ground and looking down upon it. And he knew that in New York he was looking through a great telescope down under the world and was staring straight down into the throat of an extinct volcano on the Moon.

There were few wonders of the modern world that could thrill the master pilot with any feeling of amazement, but here was a new experience. He would have spoken, would have ejaculated some word of wonder, but for the new light that claimed his eyes and brain.

The volcano, even in death, was ages old; its cold desolation showing plainly on the screen. No fires poured now from a hot throat; the

molten sea that once had raged within had hardened and choked that vast throat with rock that had frozen to make one enormous plain. Ringed about by the jagged sides of the tremendous volcano, the floor within seemed smooth by comparison, except for another depression at its upper edge.

Here was another and smaller crater inside the great ringed wall of Hercules. The light of the sun struck slantingly across to throw one side of the gigantic cup into shadow, while the opposite rim blazed brightly in the lunar dawn. And within the smaller crater, too, one side was dead black with shadow.

Dead!-No moving thing—no sign of life or indication that life might ever have been! A dead world, this!—its utter desolation struck Chet's half-uttered exclamation to a hoarse whisper of dismay. In all the universe what less likely place might one discover wherein to look for men?

HIS gaze was held in fascinated hopelessness on the barren, mountainous ring, on the inner inverted cone, on the shadow within that smaller crater—*on a tiny pinpoint of light that was flashing there!* . . . He hardly knew when he raised one trembling hand and pointed, while a voice quite unlike his own said huskily:

"Look! Look! I told you it was so! . . . There! In that little crater! —it's signaling! Three dots—now three dashes—three dots again! The old S O S!—the old call for help! It's Haldgren!"

Again the screen showed the smiling scientist.

"Caught them just right," he said, "and glad to be of service. Now, if there's anything else I can do—"

"Thanks!" said Chet in that same strained voice. "Thanks! There's nothing else." A switch clicked beneath his hand, and once more the screen was dark.

"Those dots and dashes! The old S O S! Who could doubt now?" Chet was telling himself this when the Commander's voice broke in harshly.

"Even you must see the absurdity of this, Bullard. You have heard this astronomer tell you what the rest of us knew for ourselves—that there is no air on the Moon; that it is impossible for a human being to live there. And you would have us believe that a man has lived there for five years!

"But I am taking your distinguished record into account; I am overlooking your insubordination and the folly of your reasoning. Perhaps your feeling about Haldgren does you credit; but Haldgren is dead. Now I am giving you another chance: I order you to come forward and receive this honor, which is an honor to the entire Service of Air."

CHET was staring in open amazement. "No air on the Moon," this man had said. And what of that? Neither was there air in interplanetary space, yet he had traveled there. It was inconceivable that this imperious and dictatorial man could be so blind.

"I can't do it, sir," he tried to explain. "You surely can't disregard that message, the old call for help. We were using that, you know, when Haldgren took off five years ago."

No longer did a masking softness overlay the hard brittleness of the Commander's voice.

"Your star!" he snapped. "You are no longer in the Service, Bullard!"

But Chet Bullard, as he stepped forward that the Commander might rip the triple star from his chest, was not alone. Walt Harkness was only a Pilot of the Second Class,

bet he stripped the emblem from his own silken blouse and placed it in the Commander's outstretched hand beside Chet's star.

"Permit me, sir, to share Mr. Bullard's enviable humiliation," he observed with venomous courtesy; and added:

"Whatever similar honors were in store for Mrs. Harkness and myself are respectfully declined. We, too, are of the opinion that Pilot Haldgren deserves them instead of us."

For an instant Chet's flashing smile drew his face into friendly lines. "Thanks!" he said.

But all friendliness was erased as he swung back upon the Commander.

NO thought now of the thousands of staring faces or of the millions throughout the world who were watching him and were hearing his words. Chet Bullard clipped those words into curt phrases, and he shot them at his superior officer as if from a detonite gun:

"You think your judgment better than mine—you've dropped me from the Service—and you've got the power to make that stick! But you're wrong, sir, dead wrong! And I'll make you admit it, too.

"No—don't interrupt! I'm going to say what I please, and this is it, Commander:

"Hang onto that jewel you were giving me. Keep it ready. For I'm going to the Moon. I'm going to find Haldgren, if he's still living when I get there. And, at the least, I will bring back some record to show he is the man we should honor.

"Haldgren, alive or dead, was the first man to conquer space. Neither Harkness nor I would steal an atom of his glory. I'll have the proof when I come back. And when I come—"

FOR an instant the ready grin that marked Chet's irresistible good nature lighted up his face with a silent echo of some laugh-provoking thought occurring in his mind.

"—when I do come, Commander, I will make you eat your words. It's you who will be out of the Service then, laughed out!"

The Commander smiled, too; smiled coldly, complacently, while his head shook.

"Again you are mistaken," he told Chet; "never again will you fly as much as one foot above Earth."

And still Chet's grin persisted. "Commander," he said, "a man in your position should not make so many mistakes. I am going—I give you warning now—going to the Moon. And you haven't enough Patrol Ships in all the air levels of Earth to hold me back, once I'm on my way!"

And every television screen of Earth showed a remarkable scene: a red-faced, choleric Commander of the Air, who shouted that a group of officers might leap forward to do his bidding; a dark-haired man and a girl who sprang beside him. The bodies of the two were interposed for an instant between the officers' weapons and a fair-haired man. . . . And the lean young man, with his shock of golden hair thrown back from his face, leaped like a panther in that same instant; drew himself to an open window; threw himself through, and vanished among the brilliant lights and black shadows of a New York night.

But, as he fought his way free of the throng outside, there came above the clamor of an excited crowd the voice of Walt Harkness in cryptic words:

"The ship is yours, Chet," the fugitive heard Harkness call; "it's in cold storage for you!"

CHAPTER II

A Dirty Red Freighter. . . .

CHET BULLARD was more at home among the air-lanes of Earth than he was on solid ground. But he oriented himself in an instant; knew he was on a cross street in the three hundred zone; and saw ahead of him, not a hundred feet away, the green, glowing ring that marked a subway escalator.

In the passing throng there were those who looked curiously at him. Chet checked his first headlong flight and dropped to an unhurried walk.

About him, as he well knew, the air was filled with silent radio waves that were sounding the alarm in every sentry box of the great city. They would reach the aircraft terminals and the control room of every ship within a fixed radius. He had dared the wrath of one of the most powerful officials of Earth; no effort would be spared to run him down; his picture would be flashing within ten minutes on every television screen of the Air Patrol. And Chet Bullard knew only one way to go.

Of course they would be watching for him at the airports, yet he knew he must get away somehow; escape quickly—and find some corner of the world where he could hide.

He was in the escalator, and wild plans were flashing through his mind as he watched the levels go past. "First Level; Trains North and South; Local Service. Second Level; Express Stop for Northshore Lines. Third Level; Airport Loop Lines; Transatlantic Terminals—"

Chet Bullard, his hair still tangled on his hatless head, his blouse torn where a hand had ripped off the Master Pilot's emblem, stepped from the escalator to a platform, then to a cylindrical car that slid silently in before him and whose flashing announcement-board proclaimed: *"Hoover Airport Express. No Intermediate Stops."*

WOULD they be watching for him at the great Hoover Terminal on the tip of Long Island? Chet assured himself silently that he would tell the world they would be. But even a fugitive may have friends—if he has been a master pilot and has a lean, likable face with a most disarming grin.

Where would he go? He did not know; he had been bluffing a bit, and the Commander had called him when his hand was weak; he had no least idea where he could find their ship. If only he had had a chance for a word with Walt Harkness: Walt had been flying it; he had left it apparently in a storage hangar.

But where? And what was it that Walt had called out? Chet was racking his brains to remember.

"The ship is yours," Walt had shouted . . . and something about "storage." But why should he have laid up the ship; why should he have stored it?

Chet saw the lights of subterranean stations flashing past as the car that held him rode silently through a tube that it touched not at all. He knew that magnetic rails made a grillwork that surrounded the car and that drew it on at terrific speed while suspending it in air. But he would infinitely have preferred the freedom of the high levels, and his own hand on a ship's controls.

A ship!—any ship!—but preferably his ship and Walt's. And Walt had said something of "storage—*cold storage.*" The words seemed written before him in fiery lines. It was a moment before he knew what he had recalled. Then a slow smile tugged at the corners

of his mouth, and he turned and stared through a window that showed only blackness.

"Cold storage!" That was good work on Walt's part. He had been forced to shout the directions before them all, yet tell none of those others about him where the ship was hidden. Chet was picturing that place of "cold storage" as he smiled. The fact that it was some thousands of miles away troubled him not at all.

THE great Hoover Terminal was a place where night never came. Its daylight tubes wove a network of light about the stupendous enclosure, their almost silent hissing merged to an unceasing rush of sound, so soft as to be unheard through the scuffing feet and chattering voices of the ever-hurrying crowds.

From subways the impatient people came and went, and from highway stations where busses and private cars drove in and away. The clock in the squat tower swung its electrically driven hands toward the figure 22; there lacked but two hours of midnight, and a steady stream of aircraft came dropping down the shaft of green light that reached to and through the clouds. There would be many liners landing on the hour; these that were coming in were private craft that spun their flashing helicopters like giant emeralds in the green descending light, while the noise of their beating blades filled the air with a rush of sound.

Outside the entrance to the Passenger Station, Chet Bullard withdrew himself from the surging press of hurrying men and women and slipped into a shadowed alcove. Two passing figures in the gray and gold of the Air Patrol scanned the crowd closely; Chet drew himself into the deeper shadows and waited until they were by before he emerged and followed the shelter of a coffee-house that extended toward another entrance to the field, where pilots and mechanics passed in and out.

A BULLETIN board showed in changing letters of light the official assignment of landing space. And, though every passing eye was turned toward it, Chet knew that each man was intent upon the board and not on the shadowed niche in the building behind it. He watched his chance and slipped into that shadow.

Unseen, he could see them as they approached: men in the multi-colored uniforms of many lines, who paused to read, to exchange bantering shop-talk—and to pass on.

Many voices: "Storm area over the South-shore up to Level Six. You birds on the local runs had better watch your step" . . ."—coming down at Calcutta. Yeah, a dirty, red-bottomed freighter that rammed him. I saw it take off two of his fans, but Shorty set the old girl down like a feather on the lift of the four fans he had left. You said it—Shorty's a real pilot. . . ."

Another pause; then a growling voice that proclaimed complainingly: "Lord, but I'm tired! All right, Spud; grin, you damned Irishman! But if you had been hauling the Commander all over Alaska to-day and then got ordered out again just as you were set for a good sleep, you'd be sore. What in thunder does he want his ship for to-night, I ask you?"

CHET, crouching still lower in the little retreat, stiffened to attention at the reference to the Commander. So the "big boss" had ordered out his own cruiser again! He listened still more intently to the voice that replied.

"Sure, and it's thankful you should

be to be holdin' the controls on a fine, big cruiser like that; though, betwixt you and me, 'tis myself that don't envy you your job. Me and my old freighter, we go wallowin' along. And to-night I'm takin' her home for repairs — back to the fact'ry in Roosbin where they made her; and the devil of a job it will be, for she handles with all the grace of a pig in a puddle."

Chet risked a glance when the sound of heavy footsteps indicated that one of the two speakers had gone on along to the pilots' gate. Before the huge bulletin board, in pilot's uniform and with the markings of a low-level man on his sleeve, stood the sturdy figure of the man called Spud. He started back at sight of the face peering out at him, but Chet whispered a command, and the man moved closer to the hiding place behind the board.

There were others coming in a laughing group up the walk; daylight tubes illuminated the approach. Chet spoke hurriedly.

"I'm in a devil of a mess, Spud. Will you lend a hand? Will you stand by for rescue work?"

And Spud studied the bulletin board as he growled:

"Lend a hand?—yes, and the arm with it, Mr. Bullard. You stud by me once whin I needed help; and now you ask will I stand by for rescue work. Till we crash—that's all, me bhoy!"

SPUD'S speech was tinged with the brogue of Erin; it grew perceptibly more pronounced as his quick emotions took hold of him.

"Quiet!" said Chet. "Wait till they pass!"

The newcomers stopped for no more than a glance. Then:

"I'm demoted," Chet told the round-eyed man who stared unbelievingly at the vacant place on Chet's blouse. "The sir's bot with orders for my arrest. I've got to get out, and I've got to do it quick."

And now there was only a trace of the brogue in Spud's voice. Chet knew the trick of the man's speech; touch his heart and his tongue would grow thick; place him face to face with an emergency and he would go cold and hard, while the good-natured phrasing of his native sod went from him and he talked fast and straight.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Spud. "What you've done I don't know, nor yet why you did it. But, whatever it was, I don't believe you let that triple star go for less than a damned good reason. Now, let me think; let—me—think—"

A figure in gray and gold was approaching, a member of the Air Patrol. Spud's tongue was lively with good-natured raillery as he fell into step and drew the officer with him through the pilots' gate, while Chet, from his shadow, saw with satisfaction the apparent desertion. He had known Spud O'Malley of old. Spud was square—and Spud had wanted time for thinking.

There were many who passed Chet's hiding place before a cautious whisper came to him and he saw a hand that thrust a roll of clothing around the edge of the bulletin board.

"Put 'em on!" was the order of Spud. "And smear your yellish hair with the grease! Work fast, me bhoy!"

THE command was no less imperative for being spoken beneath Spud's breath, and for the first time Chet's hopes soared high within him. It had all been so hopeless, the prospect of actual escape from the net that was closing about him. And now—!

He unrolled the tight package of cloth to find a small can of black

graphite lubricant done up in a jacket and blouse. Both were stained and smeared with grease; they were amply large. Chet did not bother to strip off his own blouse; he pulled on the other clothes over his own, and his face was alight with a grin of appreciation of Spud's attention to details as he took a daub of the grease, rubbed it on his hands, then passed them through his hair.

"Yellah," Spud had said, but the description was no longer apt. And the man who stepped forth beside Spud O'Malley in the uniform of an engineer of a tramp freighter looked like nothing else in the world but just that.

"Come on, now!" ordered Spud harshly, as a figure in gray and gold appeared around the corner of the coffee shop. "You're plinty late, me fine lad! Now get in there and clean up that dirty motor and get her runnin'! Try out every fan on the old boat; then we'll be off.

"You're number CG41!" he whispered. And Chet repeated the number as he followed the pilot through the gate.

"O. K.," said the guard at the gate, "and I'll bet he gives you hell and to spare!"

Chet slouched his shoulders to disguise his real height and followed where Spud O'Malley, with every indication of righteous anger, strode indignantly down the pavement, at the far end of which was a battered and service-stained ship.

HER hull of dirty red showed mottlings of brown; she was sadly in need of a painter's gun. She would groan and squeal, Chet knew, when the fans lifted her from the hold-down clutch; and she couldn't fly at over twenty thousand without leaking her internal pressure through a thousand cracks that made her porous as an old balloon—but to Chet's eyes the old relic of the years was a thing of sheer beauty and grace.

O'Malley was leading through an open freight hatch; Chet followed, and, at his beckoning hand, slipped into a dingy cabin.

"Lay low there," the pilot ordered, and still, as Chet observed, his speech showed how clearly the man was thinking, since the emergency still existed. "I've cleared some time ago, Mr. Bullard; we're ready to leave as soon as we get the dispatcher's O. K."

The minutes were long where Chet waited in the pilot's cabin. Each sound might mean a last-minute search of departing ships, but he tried to tell himself that the attention of the officers would be centered upon the passenger liners.

Beyond, where he could see out into the control room, a white light flashed. He heard the bellowing orders of the Irishman at the controls. And, as other sounds reached his ears, he had to grip his hands hard while he fought for control of the laughter that was almost hysterical. For, beneath him, he felt the sluggish lift of the ship, and, from every joint and plate of this old-timer of the air, came squawking protests against the cruel fates that drove her forth again to face the buffeting, racking gales.

But the blue light of an ascending area was about them, and Spud O'Malley was shouting from the control room:

"Sure, and we're off, Mr. Bullard. Now do ye come up here and tell me all about it—but I warn you, I'll not be believin' a word—"

CHAPTER III

Up From Earth

CHET had plenty of time in which to acquaint Pilot O'Malley with the facts. And, when he had told his story, it did his sick

and worried mind good to hear the explosive stream of expletives that came from the other's lips. Yet, despite the Irishman's anger, it was noticeable that he closed the tight door of the control room before he said a word.

"Only a skeleton crew," he explained. "Just the relief pilot and the engineers and a man or two in the galley, and I trust 'em all. But you can't be too careful.

"The Commander," he concluded, "is gettin' to be more an emperor than a Commander, and somethin's got to be done. Discipline we must have, 'tis true; but this kotowin' to His Royal Highness and all o' that—devil a bit do I like it! If only you could show him up, Mr. Bullard—but of course you can't."

"I'm not so sure," Chet responded. "What I told the big boss wasn't all bluff. Haldgren *did* go out, five years ago this month. We have the record of a Crescent liner's captain who saw Haldgren's little ship shoot through the R. A. and go on out as if it were going somewhere. And now we have these flashes!

"Do you see what that means, Spud? An S O S! Nobody but an Earth-man would send that, and we wouldn't do it now. We would just press the lever of our emergency-call, and every receiver within a thousand miles would pick up the scream of it.

"But we've had this Dunston Emergency Transmitter less than four years. Haldgren knew only the old S O S. And remember this: three dots, three dashes and three dots don't just happen. They showed up on the Moon. They were repeated the next night. *Somebody sent them!* Who was it?"

AND Pilot O'Malley gave the only obvious answer:

"There's only yourself and Mr. Harkness and Pilot Haldgren that could have got there. 'Twas Haldgren, of course! What a pity that you can't go; 'tis likely the poor bboy needs help."

"Five years!" mused Chet. "Five long years since he left! He must have landed safely—and then what? After five years comes a signal and that signal a call for help that no pilot worthy the name would disregard. . . .

"Where are we bound?" he demanded abruptly.

"Roothia," said O'Malley. "I disremember the name—'tis on my orders—but I know it's a long way up north."

"Spud," said Chet, "you're a rotten pilot; you're one of the worst I ever knew. Careless—that's your worst fault—and if anybody doubts that they'll believe it after this trip. For, Spud, if you're any friend of mine, and I know you are, you're going to lose your bearings and kick this old sky-hog a long way beyond that factory she is bound for. And you're going to set me down in a God-forsaken spot in the arctic where I'm pretty sure I'll find a ship waiting for me.

"And, if you just stick around for a while after that, you will see me take off for the Moon. Then, if Haldgren is there—"

Chet failed to finish the sentence; he was staring through a rear lookout, where, over the arc of the Earth's horizon, could be seen a thin crescent Moon; about it drifting clouds made a halo.

The eyes of Spud O'Malley followed Chet's, and his imaginative faculties must have been stimulated by Chet's words, for he gazed open-mouthed, as if for the first time he visioned that golden scimitar as something more substantial than a high-hung light. He drew one long incredulous breath before he answered.

"What position, sir? Say the word and I'll lose myself so bad we'll

be over the Pole and half-way to the equator again!"

"Not that bad," was Chet's assurance. "Just spot this ship over 82:14 north, 93:20 east, and I'll give you local bearings from there."

Then to himself: "'Cold storage.' Walt said; he meant our old shop, of course. Probably had a hunch we would need it."

But to the pilot he said only the one word: "Thanks!"—though the grip of his hand must have spoken more eloquently.

THE eastbound lanes of the five thousand level saw them plod slowly along, while faster and better-groomed ships slipped smoothly past; then the red hull rose to Level Twelve and swung out upon the great circle course that would bear them more nearly in the direction of the destination Chet had given. There were free levels higher up in which they could have laid a direct course, but the Irish pilot did not need Chet to tell him that the old hull would never stand it. Her internal pressure could never have been maintained at any density such as human lungs demanded.

But they were on their way, and Chet's customary genial expression gave place to one of more grim determination as he watched the white-flecked ocean drift slowly past below.

Once a patrol ship spoke them. Daylight had come to show plainly the silver hull with the distinctive red markings of the Service that slipped smoothly down from above to hang poised under flashing fans like a giant humming-bird. Her directed radio beam flashed the yellow call signal in O'Malley's control room.

CHET was beside him, and the two exchanged silent glances before O'Malley cut in his transmitter. He must give name and number—this signal was a demand that could not be disregarded—but on the old freighter was no automatic sender that would flash the information across to the other ship; the pilot's voice must serve instead.

"Number three—seven—G—four—two!" he thundered into the radiophone. "Freighter of the Interplanetial Line, without cargo—"

"For the love of Pete," shouted the loudspeaker beside him in volume to drown out the pilot's words, "are you sending this by short wave, or are you just yelling across to me? Calm down, you Irish terrier!"

Then, before the pilot could reply, the voice from the silver and red patrol ship dropped into an exaggerated mimicry of the O'Malley brogue—

"And did yez say 'twas a freighter you had there? Sure, I thot at th' very last 'twas a foine big liner from the Orient and Transpolar run, dropped down here from the hoigh livils! All right, Spud; on your way! But don't crowd the bottom of the Twelve Level so close. This is O — sixteen — L; Jimmy Maddux. By-by! I'll report you O.K."

AGAIN Chet looked at the pilot silently before he glanced back at the vanishing ship, already small in the distance. He repeated the Patrol Captain's words:

"You will 'report us O.K.'—yes, Jimmy, you'll do that, and if they want to find us again you can tell them right where to look."

"I'm pushin' her all I can, Mr. Bullard," said Spud. "'Tis all she can do. . . . And now do ye go into my cabin—there's two berths there—and we'll just turn in and sleep while my relief man takes his turn. But go in before I call him; there's not a soul on the ship

besides ourselves knows that you're here."

And, in the cabin a short time later, Pilot O'Malley chuckled as he whispered: "I gave the lad his course. And Mac will follow it, but it'll niver take him near to the part of Roonbis he expects it to. Still, the record's clear as far as he's concerned; I've got it in the log. Mac's a good lad, and I wouldn't have him get into trouble over this."

IN the freighter's cabin the chronometer was again approaching the hour of twenty-two; for nearly twenty-four hours the ship had been on her plodding way. And, lacking the A.D.D.—the Automatic Destination Detector—and other refinements of instrumental installations of the passenger ships, Pilot O'Malley had to work out his position for himself.

And, where a faster craft would have driven through with scarcely a quiver, the big ship trembled with the buffets and suction of a wintry blast that drove dry snow like sand across the lookout glasses. The twelve thousand level was an unbroken cloud of snow—a gray smother where the red ship's blunt and rusty bow nosed through.

O'Malley clung to the chart table as the air gave way beneath them and the ship fell a hundred feet or more before her racing fans took hold and jerked her back to an even keel. He managed to check his figures, then moved to the door of his cabin, opened it and called softly.

Chet was beside him in an instant. It had seemed best that he remain in hiding, and he knew what the pilot's call meant. "Made it, did you!" he exclaimed. "Now I'll take a look about and pick up my bearing points."

But one look at the ports and he shook his head.

"That's dirty," he told O'Malley, and his eyes twinkled as he felt the old ship rear and plunge with the lift of a driving gale; "and how the old girl does feel it! She can't rip through, and she can't go above. You've had some trip, Spud; it's been mighty decent of you to go to all this—"

A FLASHING of yellow light on the instrument panel brought his thanks to a sudden halt. A voice, startling in its suddenness, filled the little room.

"Calling three—seven—O—four—two! Stand by for orders! Patrol O—sixteen—L sending; acknowledge, please!"

Chet's eyes were staring into those of O'Malley. "That's Jimmy Maddux back on our trail," he said. "Now, what has got them suspicious?"

He glanced once at the collision instrument. "He's right overhead at thirty thousand," he added; "and there are more of them coming in from all sides. Now what the devil—"

Spud O'Malley had his hand on the voice switch. "Be quiet!" he commanded; then spoke into the transmitter—

"Three—seven—O—four—two acknowledging!" he said, and again Chet observed how all trace of accent had departed from his voice; it was an indication of the moment's tenseness and of the pilot's full understanding of their position.

The answering order was crisply spoken; this was a different Jimmy Maddux from the one who had chaffed the Irish pilot some hours before.

"Stand by! We're coming down! Records at Hoover Terminal show two men reporting at pilots' gate under the number of your engineer, CG41. Hold your ship exactly where you are; we're sending a man aboard!"

CHET had moved silently to the controls. The old multiple-lever instrument—he knew it well! But he looked at Spud O'Malley and waited for his nod of assent before he presumed to trespass on another pilot's domain. Then he shifted two little levers, and the ship fell away beneath them as it plunged toward the Earth.

And Pilot O'Malley was explaining to the Patrol Ship Captain as best he could for the rolling plunge of the careening ship:

"I can't hold her, sir. And you'd best be keepin' away. It's stormin' fearful down here, and I can't rise above it! Keep clear!—I'm warnin' you!" The hum of their helicopters rose to a shrill whine as Chet drove the ship out and down through the smothering clouds. "You must hear her fans on your instruments; you can see how we're pitchin'!"

He switched off the transmitter for a moment and faced Chet. "They've been checkin' close," he stated. "That was my engineer's number I gave you as we came through the gate. And, of course, he had given it before when he reported in. Now we're up against it."

The collision instrument was humming with the sound of many motors, and warning lights were giving their silent alarm of the oncoming ships.

"They're comin' in," Spud went on hopelessly, "like a flock of kites in the tropics when one of them's found somethin' dead—and it's us that's the carcass!"

BUT Chet was not listening. The snowy clouds had broken for an instant; their ship had driven through and beneath them. Through the wild, whirling chaos of white there came for an instant a rift—and far across an icy expanse Chet glimpsed a range of black hills!

He spoke sharply to the pilot. "That's Jimmy Maddux above us—kid him along, Spud! Tell him we're coming up, don't let him grab us with his magnets! This is putting you in a devil of a hole, old man. I'm sorry!—but we've got to see it through now.

"You can never set this ship down, Spud; that patrol would be on our backs in half a second. And they'd knock me out with one shot the minute I stepped outside."

The clear space in the storm had filled again with the dirty gray of wind-whipped snow; off at the right a dim glow of distant fires was the midnight sun as it shone for a brief moment. One blast, more malignant in its fury than those that had come before, tore first at the blunt bow, then caught them amidships to roll the big, sluggish freighter till her racked framework shrieked and chattered.

Spud pointed through a rear lookout where a silvery Patrol Ship flashed down through the clouds. "There's Jimmy!" he shouted. "He's takin' no chances of our landing—he's right on our tail!"

BUT Chet Bullard, his hands working at the control levers, was staring straight ahead into that gray blast; and his eyes were shining as he pulled back on a lever that threw them once more into the concealment of the whirling clouds above.

"Spud," he was shouting, "have you got a 'chute? You freighters have 'em sometimes. Get me a 'chute and I'll fool them yet! I saw the shed—our hangars—our work shop! There's where our ship is!"

They were lost once more in the snow that seemed to be driving past in solid drifts. Chet heard Spud shouting down a voice tube. And, curiously, it was plain that the Irish pilot had lost all tenseness from his voice; he was happy and as carefree as if he had found the

answer to all his perplexing questions. He was calling an order to his relief pilot.

"Mac—do ye break out two parachutes, me lad! Bring 'em up here, and shake a leg! No, there's nothin' to worry about—divil a thing!"

Then, into the transmitter, he shouted thickly as he switched the instrument on:

"Jimmy, me bhoy, kape away! Kape away, I'm tellin' you, or ye'll have me Irish temper disturbed, and I'm a divil whin I'm roused! What do I know about your twin ingineers? Wan of thim makes trouble enough for me! Now take yourself away, and don't step on the tail of this ship or we'll go down to glory together!—unless we go to another terminal and find ourselves in hell, and us all covered wid snow. Think how divilish conspicuous you'd be feelin'—"

A DISCORD of voices silenced his laughing banter; on the instrument board the warning light was flashing imperatively. Above the bedlam of voices one stood out, and all other commands went silent before the voice of authority.

"Silence! This is the Commander of Air! Orders for O—sixteen—L: seize that ship! Your magnets!—disregard damage!—get your magnets on that ship and hold her. We are coming down—"

Chet reached for the transmitter switch and opened it that their voices might not go beyond the control room.

"Lots of company; they seem pretty certain that they're on the right track. And the big boss himself is coming down to call. Can't you hurry those 'chutes?"

The control room door was flung open as the figure of a young man stumbled through and dropped two bundles of cloth and webbing upon the floor. He clung to the doorframe as Chet threw the big freighter into a totally unexpected manoeuver that rolled them down and away from a silver-bellied ship above. Then the levers moved again, and the ship went hard-a-port as Chet caught again one fleeting glimpse of shadows below that could only be the markings of a building he had known well.

"Hold her there, Spud!" he shouted. "He'll be back in a minute or two! He'll get us next time!"

Chet was reaching for the straps of a 'chute. He had the webbing about him when he stopped to waste precious seconds in wide-eyed staring at the figure of Spud O'Malley.

SPUD was pulling at a recalcitrant buckle. He had motioned the relief pilot to take the controls, and now the bulk of a parachute pack hung awkwardly behind him.

"Spud!" Chet shouted. "You're not stepping out too! It's no sure thing with these old 'chutes; they're probably rotten! Stay here! Tell 'em I stuck you up with a gun!—tell 'em I made you bring me—"

"If you must talk," said Spud O'Malley calmly, and pulled a strap tight across his chest, "do ye be tryin' to work while you talk. Get that harness on! If I let you stow away on my ship you can do no less than take me along on yours!"

A crashing impact drove the men to the floor in a sprawling heap; Chet pulled the last strap tight as he lay there. The lookouts were black above where the belly of a Patrol Ship clung close.

"Jimmy knows how to obey orders," said Chet as he came to his feet. "No cable magnets for Jimmy! He just smashed down on top of us, ripped off our fans and grabbed hold." He was helping Spud to his feet as he spoke.

"Mac, me bhoy," the pilot told his assistant, "the log has it all, the

whole story. There'll be no trouble for you at all."

He yanked quickly at the port-opening switch, and the big steel disk backed slowly out of its threaded seat and swung wide.

CHET drew back one involuntary step as a blast of icy wind drove stinging snow into his face. Then, without a word, he gave Spud O'Malley a joyous grin and threw himself out into the void. . . .

And, later, as he released the 'chute where a wind was dragging him violently across an icy expanse, he was laughing exultantly to see another 'chute whirled into the enshrouding drifts, while the chunky figure of a man came scrambling to his feet that he might shake a fist into the air toward some hidden enemy and shout into the storm epithets only half-heard.

"—and be damned to ye!" Chet heard him conclude; then was close enough to throw one arm about the figure and draw him after where he made his way toward a building that was like a mountain of snow.

Spud must have marveled at the craft within; at her sleek, shining sides; the flat nose that ended in a black exhaust port. He was examining the other exhausts that ringed her round when Chet pulled out a lever from the streamlined surface and swung open an entrance port.

He motioned Spud into the brilliantly lighted interior, where nitron illuminators were almost blinding as they shone of gleaming levers and dials of a control room like none that Spud O'Malley had ever seen.

Chet had thrown the building's doors open wide; a whining motor had drawn them back on hidden tracks. Now he closed the entrance port with care, then glanced at his instruments before he placed his hand on a metal ball.

IT hung suspended in air within a cage of curved bars. It was a modification of the high-liner ball-control, and it was new. Walt Harkness had had it installed to replace a more crudely fashioned substitute that had brought them safely back from the Dark Moon. The name of that new satellite was on Chet's lips as his thin hand rested delicately upon the ball.

"It's not the Dark Moon this time, old girl," he told the ship, "though you've taken me there twice. But we're going up just the same, and I told the Commander he hasn't Patrol Ships enough to hold us back." His fingers were gripping the little ball—lifting it—moving it forward. . . .

And, as if he lifted the ship itself, the silent cylinder came roaring into life. Within the great building was a thundering blast that made the voice of the storm less than a whispering breath. It came but faintly through the heavily insulated walls, but Chet felt the lift of the ship, and that joyous smile was crinkling about his eyes as the silvery cylinder floated smoothly out of her shelter into the grip of the wind.

His eyes were on an upper lookout, where clouds were driving away like a curtain unrolled. More cloud banks were coming, but, for a time, the heavens were clear where the great red hull of a rusty freighter hung helpless beneath a red and silver Patrol Ship whose magnets held fast to its prey.

THERE were other shapes in the markings of the Service that shot slantingly down. Chet thought again of the carrion birds; then he saw the gold star on the bow of a great cruiser and knew from that ship that the Commander must be seeing their own below. Then he eased gently forward on a tiny ball—forward and forward.

while the compensating floor of the control room swung up behind them and seemed thrusting up with unbearable weight.

There were flashes from the cruisers above, and flashes of red on the ice behind with fountains of shattered ice and rock; detonite works its most terrible destruction on a surface that is brittle and hard. But of what avail are detonite shells against a craft whose speed builds up to something greater than the muzzle velocity of a shell?—a silvery craft that sweeps out and out toward a black mountain range; then swings slowly up in a curve of sheer beauty that bends into banked masses of clouds —and ends.

But within the control room, Chet Bullard, no longer Master Pilot of the World, but master, in all truth, of space, knew that his ship's flight was far from ending. He turned to grin happily at his companion.

"We're off!" he shouted. "And it's thanks to you that we made it. If Haldgren's alive he'll have you to thank; for it's you that has done the trick so far!"

But Spud O'Malley answered soberly as he stared up and out into the blackness of levels he had never seen.

"I've helped," he admitted; "I've helped a bit. But it's a divil of a job of navigatin' that's ahead. And that's up to you, Chet Bullard; 'tis no job for an old comedhaun like mesilf!"

Chet felt the lift of the Repelling Area as they shot through. Ahead was the black velvet night that he know so well; its silent emptiness was pricked through with bright points of fire.

"I found the Dark Moon," he said slowly, "and that you can't see at all. This other will be easy."

There was no boastfulness in the tone, and Spud O'Malley nodded as he glanced respectfully at the young man who threw back his disheveled mop of hair from a lean face and marked down some cryptic figures on a record sheet.

Chet Bullard was on the job . . . and his passenger, it would seem, was satisfied that his unbelievable adventure was well begun.

CHAPTER IV

Life Monstrous and Horrible

"IT looks," said Spud O'Malley, "as if some bad little spalpeen of the skies had thrown pebbles at it when 'twas soft. It's fair pockmarked with places where the stones have hit."

He was staring through a forward lookout, where the whole sky seemed filled with a tremendous disk. One quarter was brilliantly alight; it formed a fat crescent within whose arms the rest of the globe was held in fainter glowing. By comparison, this greater portion was dark, though illuminated by earthlight far brighter than any moonlight on Earth.

But light or dark, the surface showed nothing but an appalling desolation where the rocky expanse had been still further torn and disrupted—pockmarked, as O'Malley had said, with great rings that had been the walls of tremendous volcanoes.

Chet was consulting a map where a similar area of circular markings had been named by scientists of an earlier day.

"Hercules," he mused, and stared out at the great circle of the moon. "The crater of Hercules! Yes, that must be it. That dark area off to one side is the Lake of Dreams; below it is the Lake of Death. Atlas! Hercules! Suffering cats, what volcanoes they must have been!"

"I don't like like your names," objected O'Malley. "Lake of Death!

That's not so good. And I don't see any lake, and the whole Moon is wrong side up, according to your map."

Chet reached for the ball-control, moved it, and swung their ship in a slow, rotary motion. The result was an apparent revolution of the Moon.

"There, it's right side up," Chet laughed; "that is, if you can tell me what direction is 'up' out here in space. And, as for the names, don't let them disturb you; they don't mean anything. Some old-timer with a little three-inch telescope probably named them. The darker areas looked like seas to them. Astronomers have known better for a long time; and you and I—we're darned sure of it now."

THE great sea of shadow, a darker area within the shaded portion whose only light came from the Earth, was plainly a vast expanse of blackened rock. An immense depression, like the bottom of some earlier sea, it was heaved into corrugations that Chet knew would be mountain-high at close range. Marked with the orifices of what once had been volcanoes, the floor of that Lake of Death was hundreds of miles in extent.

But as for seas and lakes, there was no sign of water in the whole, vast, desolate globe. An unlikely place, Chet admitted, for the beginning of their search, and yet—those flashes of light!—the S O S! They had been real!

The bow blast had been roaring for over an hour; their strong deceleration made the forward part of the ship seem "down." And down it was, too, by reason of the pull of the great globe they were approaching. But the roaring exhaust up ahead was checking their speed; Chet measured and timed the apparent growth of the Moon-disk and nodded his satisfaction at their reduced speed.

"This will stop us," he said. "I didn't know but we would have to swing off, shoot past, and return under control. But we're all right, and there is the place we are looking for—the big ring of Herculea, the level floor of rock inside it. And over at one side the smaller crater—"

HE was gazing entranced at the mammoth circle that had been a volcano's throat—the very one he had seen flashed on the screen. He moved the control to open a side exhaust and change their direction of fall. He was still staring, with emotions too overwhelming for words, and Spud O'Malley was silent beside him, as the great ring spread out and became an up-thrust circle of torn, jagged mountains some thirty or more miles across and directly below.

They fell softly into that circle. Its mountainous sides were high; they blocked off the view of the enormous terraces beyond that had been the crater's sloping sides.

From the direction that had suddenly become "east," the rising sun's strong light struck in a slant to make the bar rocks seem incandescent. On one side the giant rim of the encircling mountains was black with shadow. The shadow reached out across the vast, rocky floor almost to the foot of the opposite wall many miles away. It enveloped their falling ship like a cushioning, ethereal sea: velvety, softly black, almost palpable.

It was wrapping them about in the darkness of night as Chet's slender hand touched so delicately upon the ball-control — checked them, eased off, drew back again until the thundering exhausts echoed softly where their ship hung suspended a hundred feet above a

rocky floor. The shrouding darkness erased the harsh contours of mountain and plain; it seemed shielding this place of desolation and horror from critical, perhaps unfriendly eyes of these beings from another world. And Chet laid their ship down gently and silently on the earthlit plain as if he, too, felt this sense of intrusion — as if there might be those who would resent the trespass of unwanted guests.

But Spud O'Malley must have experienced no such delicacy of feeling. He let go one long pent-up breath.

"And may the saints protect us!" he said. "The Lake of Death outside, and inside here is purgatory itself, or I don't know my geography. But you made it, Chet, me bboy; you made it! What a sweet little pilot you are!"

"THERE'S air here," Chet was telling his companion later; "air of a sort, but it's no good to us."

He pointed to the spectro-analyzer with its groupings of lines and light bands. "Carbon dioxide," he explained, "and some nitrogen, but mighty little of either. See the pressure gage; it's way down.

"But that won't bother us too much. We've got some suits stowed away in the supplies that will hold an atmosphere of pressure, and their oxygen tanks will do the rest. We were ready for anything we might find on our Dark Moon trip, but we didn't need them there. Now they'll come in handy."

"That's all right," O'Malley assured him; "I've gone down under water in a diving suit; I've gone outside a ship for emergency repairs in a suit like yours when the air was as thin as this; I can stand it either way. But what I want to know is this:

"What the divil chance is there of findin' your man, Haldgren, in such a frozen corner of purgatory as this? How could he live here? Here you've come in a fine, big ship, and his was a little bit of a bullet by comparison. Yet I doubt if you could live here for five years with all your big oxygen supply. Now, how could he have done it with his little outfit?

"And what has he eaten? Does this look like a likely place for shootin' rabbits, I ask you? Can a man catch a mess of fish in that empty Lake of Death? Or did Haldgren bring a sandwich with him, it may be?"

CHET BULLARD shook his head doubtfully.

"Don't get sarcastic!" he grinned. "You can't think of any wilder questions than I have asked myself.

"He couldn't have lived here, Spud; that's the only answer. It just isn't humanly possible. All I know is that he did it. I can't tell you how I know it, but I do. Those lights were a human call for help. No living man but Haldgren could have flashed them. He's alive—or he was then; that's all I know."

Spud crossed the control room as he had done a score of times to look through a glass port at the world outside. Chet, too, turned to the lookout by which he stood and stared through it. The men had found themselves surprisingly light within the ship. They had been compelled to guard against sudden motion; a step, instead of carrying them one stride, might hurl them the length of the room. This lowered gravitational pull helped to explain to the pilot that outer world.

There, close by, was the rocky plain on which he had landed the ship. Smooth and shiny as obsidian in places, again it was spongy gray, the color of volcanic rock, bubbling with imprisoned gases at the in-

scant of hardening. It stretched out and down, that gently rolling plain, for a thousand yards or more, then ended in a welter of nightmare forms done in stone. It was like the work of some demented sculptor's tortured brain.

JUTTING tongues of rock stood in air for a hundred—two hundred—feet. Chet hardly dared estimate size in this place where all was so strange and unearthly. The hot rock had spouted high in the thin air, and it had frozen as it threw itself frantically out from the inferno of heat that had given it birth. The jets sprayed out like spume-topped waves; they were whipped into ribbons that the winds of this world could not tear down, and the ribbons shone, waving white in the earthlight. The tortured stone was torn and ripped into twisted contortions whose very writhing told of the hell this had been. Its grotesque horror struck through to the deeper levels of Chet's mind with a feeling he could not have depicted in words.

From the higher elevation where their ship lay he could look out and across this welter of storm-lashed rock to see it level off, then vanish where another crater mouth yawned black. Here was the inner crater! It had seemed small before; it was huge now—a place of mystery, a black, waiting throat into which Chet knew he must go—a place of indefinable terror.

But it was the place, too, whence strange flashes had come, flashes that had told of the distress and suffering of men since the time when wireless waves had been widely used. The old call—the S O S!—it had come from that throat; it had seemed a call sent directly to him! And Chet Bullard's eyes held steadily toward that place of mystery and of a greater unknown.

"I'm going down," he told himself more than O'Malley. "There's something about it I can't understand, something pretty damnable about it, I admit. But, whatever it is, that's what I am here to find out."

"'Tis a divil of a place to die," said O'Malley, "and not one I'd pick out at all. But it may be we won't have to. I'm goin' along, of course."

THE master pilot was reaching for the flexible metal suit he had brought from the store room. It was air-tight, gas-proof; it would hold an internal pressure far beyond anything the wearer would demand; and its headpiece was flexible like the body of the suit, and would fit him closely.

He drew the suit up over the clothes he wore and closed the front with one pull of a metal tab. Within, soft rubber-faced cushions had interlocked; the body would fasten to the headpiece in the same way. But Chet paused with the headpiece in his hand.

He looked at the glass window that would be before his eyes; at the thin diaphragms that would come over his ears and that would admit all ordinary sounds; and he tried out the microphone attachment that he could switch on to bring to his ears the faintest whisper from outside. All this he examined with care while he seemed to be thinking deeply. Then he straightened and looked at his companion.

"No, Spud, you're not going," he said. "This is my job. You'll stay with the ship. You and I make a rather small army: we don't know yet what we may be up against, and we mustn't risk all our forces in one advance. I'll see what is there; and, in case anything happens, you can take the ship back. I've taught you enough on the way

over; I had this very thing in mind."

He slipped the helmet over his blond head before O'Malley could reply.

THE ear-pieces and the microphone allowed him to hear. Another diaphragm in the center of the metal across his chest took his own voice and shouted it into the room.

"Sure, I know you want to go, Spud; but you'll have to stay in reserve. Now show me how well you can fly the ship. Lift her off; then drift over that crater, and we'll have a look-see!"

Spud O'Malley's face was glum as he obeyed. Spud had seen nothing but death in this place of horror—Chet had observed that plainly—yet it was equally plain that the Irish pilot was finding the order to live in safety a bitter dose. But Spud knew how to take orders; he lifted the little ball gently and swung the ship out toward the blackness of that deeper pit.

Chet was watching the changing terrain. He saw the place of solid-spouted rock end; saw it flatten out to an undulating surface that had rolled and heaved itself into many-colored shapes. Even in the earth-light the kaleidoscopic colors were vivid in their changing reds and blues and yellow sheens. Then this surface sloped sharply away, though here it was rough with broken rock where half-hardened lava, coughed from that throat, had fallen back and adhered to the molten sides.

This rock in the inner crater was gray, pale and ghostly in the earth-light. It went down and still down where Chet's eyes could not follow—down to an utter blackness. Chet was staring speculatively at that waiting dark when the first flash came.

Blindingly keen! A flash of white light!—another and another! It blazed dazzlingly into their cabin in vivid dashes and dots—the same signal as before was being repeated!

A HUNDRED yards away was a little shelf of rock. Chet jerked at O'Malley's shoulder with his metal-cased hand and pointed.

"Set her down!" he ordered. "Let me out there! We can't put the ship down where those lights are; the throat is too narrow; there may be air-currents that would smash us on a sharp rock. I'll go down! You wait! I'll be back."

He was opening the inner door of the entrance port. Another closure in the outer shell made an air-lock. He took time for one grip at the hand of Spud O'Malley, one grin of excited, adventurous joy that wrinkled about his eyes behind the window of his helmet—then he picked up a detonite pistol, examined again its charge of tiny shells, jammed it firmly into the holster at his waist and swung the big door shut behind him.

And Pilot O'Malley watched him go with a precaution that he dared not speak. He heard the closing of the outer door; saw the tall, slender figure in its metal suit like a knight of old as Chet waved once, settled the oxygen tank across his shoulders and picked his way carefully over a waste of shattered stone that led down and down into the dark.

Then the Irishman looked once at the suit he had expected to wear, stared back where the figure of Chet had vanished, then dropped his head upon his hands while his homely face was twisted convulsively.

IT had come so soon! The great adventure was upon them before he had realized. The reconnaissance — the flashes — and then Chet had gone! And now he was

alone in a silent ship that rested quietly in this soundless world. The silence was heavy upon him; it seemed pressing in with actual weight to bear him down. It was shattered at the last by the faintest of whispered echoes from without.

Spud was on his feet in an instant, his eyes straining at one lookout after another, each giving him a view of only the desolation he knew and hated.

What could it have been? he demanded. He found and rejected a dozen answers before he saw, far down in the black crater-mouth, a flash of red; then heard again that ghost of a sound and knew it for what it was.

Thick walls, these of the space ship, and insulated well; and the thin atmosphere of this wild world could cut a blast of sound to a mere fraction of its volume! But the walls were admitting a fragmental echo of what must have been a reverberating voice. They were quivering to the roar of exploding detonite!

It was Chet! He was fighting, he was in trouble! Spud's trembling hands steadied upon the metal control; he lifted the ship as smoothly as even Chet might have done, and he drove it out and down into a throat too narrow for safety, but where the tiny, red flash of a weapon had called with an S O S as plain as any lettered call—a message to which brave men have everywhere responded.

HE saw Chet but once. The master pilot had shown him the flare release lever; he moved it now, and the place of darkness was suddenly blinding with light. There were rocks close at hand; the crater had narrowed to a funnel throat that was cut and terraced as if by human hands. Below, it ended in a smooth stone floor where the lava had sealed it shut.

From a terrace came the gleaming reflection of Chet's suit. Miraculously the gleam was doubled, as if another in similar garb stood at his side. And beyond, from blocks of stone, came leaping things—living creatures!

The light died. Spud realized he had not opened the release lever full. He fumbled for it—found it, jammed it over! And in the light that followed he saw only empty, terraced walls where nothing moved, and a lava floor below that, for an instant, gaped open, then again was smooth and firm.

And the thunder of his ship's exhausts came back to him from those threatening walls to tell of a loneliness more certain and terrible than any solitude he had found in the silence where he had waited above.

But through all his dismay ran an undercurrent of puzzled wonderment. For here, on a dead world, where all men agreed there could be no life, he had seen the impossible.

Only one glimpse before the light had died; only for an instant had he seen the things that leaped upon Chet—but he knew! Never again could any man tell Spud O'Malley that the Moon was a lifeless globe . . . and he knew that the life was of a form monstrous and horrible and malign!

CHAPTER V

"And I've Brought You to This!"

THE master pilot, when he stepped forth upon that weird globe which was the Moon, found himself plunged into a spectral world. Even from within the airtight suit, through whose helmet-glass he peered, he sensed, as he had not when inside the ship, the vast desolation, the frozen emptiness of this rocky waste.

His suit of woven metal was

lined throughout with heavy fabric of insuline fibers, that strange product brought from the jungle heat of the upper Amazon to keep out the bitter cold of this frozen world. His ship was felted with the same material between its double walls; without it there would have been no resisting the cold of these interstellar reaches.

But, despite the padding within his suit, he felt the numbing cold of this dead world strike through. And the bleak and frigid barrenness that met his gaze was so implacably hostile to any living thing as to bring a shudder of more than physical cold.

No warming sun, as yet, reflected from the rocks. About him was the blackness of a fire-formed lithosphere, whose lighter veining and occasional ashy fields were made ghostly in the earthlight.

One slow, all-seeing glance at this!—one moment of wondering amazement when he tilted his head far back that he might look up to the mouth of the crater and see, in a dead-black sky, the great crescent of earth—a vast, incredible moon peeping over the serrate edge. Then, as if the interval of time since leaving the ship had been measured in hours instead of brief seconds, he remembered the flashing lights that had signaled from below.

HIS first step carried him, slipping and sprawling awkwardly, across a rocky slope white with the rime of carbon dioxide frost. He came to his feet and turned once to wave toward the ship where he knew Spud O'Malley must be watching from a lookout. Then, moving cautiously, to learn the gage of his own strength in this world of diminished weights, he started down.

Rough going, Chet found; the wall of this great throat had not hardened without showing signs of its tortured coughing. But Chet learned to judge distance, and he found that a fifty-foot chasm was a trifle to be crossed in one leap; huge boulders, whose molten sides had frozen as they ran and dripped, could be surmounted by the spring of his leg muscles that could throw him incredibly through the air. And always he went downward toward the place where the lights had flashed.

They came once more. He had descended a thousand feet, he was estimating, when the black igneous rocks blazed blindingly with a reflected light like that of a thousand suns.

Another hundred feet below, down a precipitous slope, was a broad table of rock. He saw it in the instant before he threw one metal-clad arm across the eye-piece of his helmet to shut out the glare. And he saw, in that fraction of a second, a moving figure, another like himself, clad in an armored suit whose curves and fine-woven mesh caught the light in a million of sparkling flames.

It was Haldgren, he told himself; and there was something that came chokingly into his throat at the thought. That lonely figure—one tiny dot of life on a bleak and lifeless stage! It was pitiful, this undying effort to signal, to let his own world know that he still lived.

CHET did not put it into coherent words, but there was an overwhelming emotion that was part pity and part pride. He was suddenly glad and thankful to belong to a race of men who could carry on like this—who never said die. And, as the glare winked out, he threw himself recklessly down that last slope and brought up in a huddle at the feet of the one who had started back in affright. There was one metal-cased hand that went

in a helpless gesture to the throat; the figure, all silvery white in the dim Earth-glow, staggered back against a wall of rock; only by inches did it miss a fall from the precipice edge where the rock platform ended.

From the floor, where his fall had flung him in awkward posture, Chet saw this; saw it and marveled vaguely. What picture he had formed of Haldgren—what he had expected of him—he could not have told. Certainly it was not this slenderly youthful figure, nor this reaction that was more of fright than startled amazement. And the voice! Surely he had heard an involuntary, half-stifled scream!

He came slowly to his feet. And he was wondering now if his deductions had been wrong. He had been so sure that the sender of those messages was an Earth-man; he had been so certain of finding Haldgren.

SLOWLY he crossed the table of rock toward the waiting figure; gently he extended his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of peaceful promise. Whoever, whatever this was—this Moon-being who had signaled and in doing so had happened upon the letters that had a definite meaning of Earth—Chet knew he must not frighten him. One outstretched hand touched the metal that cased an arm; moved upward to the head-piece, as close-fitting as his own; tilted it that the light of Earth might shine within and show him what manner of being he had found.

And Chet, who had seen strange creatures on that Dark Moon where he and Harkness had explored, was prepared, despite the suit so like his own, to see some weird being of this newer world. But for what the soft light of that distant Earth disclosed he was entirely unprepared.

Eyes, blue and lovely as an azure sea but wide with terror and dismay; eyes that showed plainly a consternation of unbelief that changed slowly as the blue eyes stared into Chet's gray ones, until they were suddenly misty with tears; and the figure sagged and would have dropped at his feet had he not caught it in his arms.

He heard his own voice exclaiming in wonderment: "A girl! One of our own kind! Out here! On the Moon!"

And another voice, sweetly tremulous, replied:

"Oh, it's true—it's true! You have come! You read my call! Oh, I hardly dared hope—"

Then the thrilling ecstasy of happiness in the voice gave place to accents of dismay as some horror of fear swept in upon her.

"And I've brought you to this! You will be lost! Quick! Climb for your life! I will come after. Quick! Quick!"

THERE was agony in the voice now, and the figure wrenched itself from Chet's arms to point one slender hand upward in frantic urging, while yet the head turned that the eyes might look backward as if some danger threatened from below.

"I've got a ship," Chet assured her. "God knows who you are or how you got here, but it's all right now. We'll leave."

He had regained his grip upon one of those slender hands and was preparing to swing her up to the top of an incredibly high rock. Her scream checked him and sent his one free hand to the detonite pistol at his waist.

"Behind you!" she cried. "Look back! They have come out!"

The crater-pit behind and below them was black with the inky blackness of smooth, fire-formed rock. Its many facets were smooth and polished; they made mirrors, many

of them, for the earthlight reflected from the crater mouth. They served to diffuse this dim light and throw it again upon the monstrous blacknesses that were swarming from below.

"Men!" thought Chet in one instant of half-comprehension. Then, as he saw the chalk-white bodies, the dead and flabby whiteness of their faces from which red eyes stared, he revised his estimate; here was nothing human.

The pistol was in his hand, but as yet he had not fired. Only the terror in the girl's voice had told him that these were enemies; he waited for a closer view or for some direct attack, and needed to wait but a moment.

Only an instant after he had seen, the chalk-white bodies clustered below were in motion. They came leaping up the smooth expanses of rock, and they were obscured at times as if by black curtains that were drawn across their bodies. Then they would flash out again in dead-white nakedness.

IT was uncanny. Chet had a feeling that they were wrapping themselves in black invisibility. Only when a score of the white things threw themselves out into space did he know the truth.

Out and upward they sprang, to soar above Chet's head and land on the slope above. All escape was cut off now; but it was not this thought that held Chet motionless for that moment of horror. It was the glimpse he had had against the light of the crater mouth of beating, flailing wings that whipped the thin air above him; of curved claws; and of long, horrible tails that might have belonged to giant rats. And the demoniac cries that the thin air brought him were no more suggestive of devils unleashed than were the leathery wings and the fleshy tails of the beasts.

Yet it was not this alone that stunned the mind of the master pilot, but the horrible incongruity of this monstrous inhumanness allied with the human form of their bodies. And throughout he observed, with a curious sense of detachment, the furious beating of the wings, almost useless in the thin air, and the expansion and contraction of sac-like membranes on each side of the necks which he took to be auxiliary lungs.

IT was the girl's action that brought Chet to his senses. She moved slowly across the smooth table of rock toward the three or four beasts who had gained its level. Her head was bowed in utter dejection; Chet sensed it as plainly as if she had spoken. She held out her hands helplessly toward the creatures—and in that instant Chet's pistol spoke.

Tiny shells, those of a detonite pistol, and the grain of explosive in the tip of each bullet is microscopic. But no body, human or inhuman, be it made of flesh, can withstand the shattering concussion of that exploding shell.

The beasts beside that figure, slenderly girlish even in its metal sheath, fell into the pit beyond; their screams rang horribly as they fell. There were others who took their places, and they, too, vanished under the smashing shots.

And then, after timeless moments of waiting, while the only sound was the half-audible voice of the girl who sobbed: "Now you are surely lost. They will kill you—you should not have fired—I should never have brought you here"—there came the familiar thunder of a ship's exhausts.

Down from above, a black shadow came silently crashing; a blaze of light terrific in its brilliance brought an exclamation to Chet's lips and hope to his heart.

"Spud! You old fool, you're coming to get us!"

But the words ended with an avalanche of bodies that threw themselves down the black slope. There were others coming from below, leaping from the stones. The ledge was filled with them.

Chet was firing blindly as he felt himself borne down—felt long fingers that ripped, then closed about his throat and jammed the metal of his suit in chokingly. He heard the beating of giant wings about him; felt himself half-carried and half-thrown toward a floor of rock far below.

There was an opening that loomed blackly in that floor; one glimpse of his surroundings Chet had before the press of bodies closed him in. They were forcing the shining, silvery figure of a girl into that black opening—dropping her! Then he felt himself hurled into the same void, while above him a ship of space thundered vainly from her great exhausts as if roaring in rage at her own futility.

CHAPTER VI

Heart of the Moon

IN the grasp of the winged creatures' long, clawed hands Chet was helpless. He was struggling vainly when they released their hold and he felt himself falling into a pit that, as far as he knew, was a bottomless abyss. He was still struggling to right himself in mid-air when he struck.

To fall even so short a distance on Earth would have meant instant death. Here, where gravitation's pull was but one-sixth that of Earth, he still struck on a rocky floor with a thud that made him sick for lack of breath.

Above him was a pale circle of light. Tipping the edge of a vast crater mouth high above was a rim of brilliance. Earthlight! Chet was suddenly certain that he was seeing that glow for the last time as the circle went black, and there came to him the unmistakable clang of metal where a door was shut.

Through the countless mingled emotions that filled him he was wondering what manner of creatures these were into whose hands he had fallen. Intelligent, beyond a doubt, in their own way; he could not question the evidence of his own eyes and ears. They were able to work in metals and to seal the mouth of this lunar tomb.

But he was still alive; he could not give up now. This adventure upon which he had launched with such high hopes had turned out differently than expected; but, he told himself, it was not ended yet.

And, instead of a lifeless globe, he had found this: a place peopled with strange, half-human life. And, more marvelous still, instead of Haldgren, whom he had come to seek, there had been a girl!

CHET had recovered his ability to breathe, had made sure that the oxygen tank was intact; and now he called softly into the blackness of this dark vault where he had seen her thrown.

"Are you alive?" he asked. "Can you hear me?"

For answer came quick rustling of moving bodies, the smooth rasping of wings on leathery wings, hands that fumbled for him, then closed about arms and legs and throat, while in his ears was a chattering of high-pitched squeals. Again he was lifted in air, held there in the grip of a score of lean, long-fingered hands. He was nerving himself to undergo without flinching whatever new torture might be in store. Yet he thrilled inexplicably as, through the sounds of these things about him, he heard a muffled: "Yes—yes! Oh, I am glad—"

The sentence was unfinished. Before Chet's eyes a light was growing. A mere slit at first, it grew to a luminous circle in the rocky floor. And, as it opened, he felt the pressure of his metal suit upon his body, where before it had been slightly ballooned by the pressure of oxygen he had maintained.

With the opening of this door to another subterranean chamber had come a renewed atmospheric pressure. And now, in the denser gas, he saw, in ghastly silhouette against the lighted pit, flying figures that floated and soared on outstretched wings of inky black.

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BESIDE him and above he heard the swishing flutter of other wings; he felt himself lifted from the floor; he was being floated out above the luminous pit by the flying things that held him.

No direct glare came from below, but a soft violet radiance. It shone full upon him—past him—to light up and give detail to those faces that had been featureless before. Chet had just one moment of fascinated staring into the diabolical, pasty faces where narrow, red eyes stared back into his. Then the squealing voices were stilled!

One, louder than the rest, rasped an order. And again Chet felt the hands relax; once more he was falling, down—down—and still down—until he knew that his velocity of fall meant an impact he could never survive.

And, curiously, as he fell, his mind was entirely unconcerned with his own fate. For himself, he had accepted death. But he saw for what seemed like hours a vision of a familiar control room and an Irish pilot who sat by the controls. He was looking sharply ahead, he was checking speed, he was landing softly—safely—on a familiar field of Earth. . . .

That passed; and, following, came a feeling of regret, a deep hurt and a rage at his own inability to be of help. For, above him, through the luminous air, he saw another body falling, and he knew that the girl, too, had been thrown to the same fate.

THOSE eyes of blue had locked with his for but a few brief seconds. Who she was—what she was—he had no way of knowing. But in that instant of mental meeting there had passed a flash between the two that had burned deeply into Chet's real and hidden self.

Chet, himself, had he been in laughing mood, might have smiled at the idea of affection being born in that brief time. Yet he might have asked instead how long was needed to bridge the sharp gap of a radio-power transmitter; how much time was needed for anode and cathode each to recognize the other. Something of this was passing in confusion through his mind while his more conscious faculties were tensing his body for the fatal impact he knew must come.

Without thinking the thought in words he knew that the luminous walls had receded. They were more distant now; their glow came to him from far above, and, as his falling body turned again and again in air, he saw that below him was nothing but a vast emptiness filled with luminous vapors that swirled and writhed.

Then the last gleam of lighted walls faded; he was falling at terrific speed through a black tempest whose winds tore and screamed about him.

IT was his own falling speed that made these winds; there remained with him enough of reasoning power to realize this. And he waited, and marveled that he could fall so tremendous a distance. First

had been the great shaft down which he had plunged; then, as it widened, had come this greater void. The crater of Hercules must have opened into a vast shell or a cavern of incredible depth. The winged things of the Moon knew of it; they had cast him to his death—him and the girl.

Her slowly turning body was not far away; it was as if they two hung suspended in air, while frightful blasts of whatever gas filled this space whipped and shrieked past and wrapped them round with a terrific pressure. And then the tempest ceased. Slowly the blasts diminished; the pressure relaxed; gradually the sense of falling passed away, and with this there came a glimpse of light.

Again the walls glowed as they had before, but far off in the distance. Chet saw them grow luminous while he seemed hung motionless in space. Then once more they drew away from him; once more he knew he was falling away from that light — plunging again into the depths he had traversed.

And now, despite the oxygen that came to him uninterruptedly, he found his head swimming. The limit of human endurance had been reached.

Desperately he tried to bring his reason to bear upon this miracle that had happened. He had not struck; instead of falling to his death he had cushioned against something: he was falling again where, not far away, another metal-clad figure hung limply in air and fell as he fell. And with that knowledge the whirling turmoil within his brain ended in a blood-red flashing that went finally to merciful darkness. . . .

THAT darkness still wrapped him thickly about when he regained consciousness—a darkness carved from utter black only by a faint luminosity that seemed to penetrate and be part of the air about him.

Still hardly more than half-conscious, lying, it seemed, on a soft bed where he was weightless, he stirred and flung out one arm. From his fingertips he saw whirls of violet light sweep out and away, as vortices might have been set in motion by a swimmer in a more liquid medium.

Fascinated, failing utterly to comprehend where he was, he moved his hands deliberately, swept one arm from side to side—and a number of luminous whirlpools went spinning out into space. And then he remembered.

He remembered the terrific fall that miraculously brought him back to a place of light like that where his fall had begun. He remembered beginning the second fall; and, while he still could not know what it meant, he knew that he must have been unconscious for hours. And, with that, his thoughts came back to the girl. For the first time he found leisure to give mental voice to his wonderment.

The mystery of it all!—of her presence here on the Moon! Again he was overwhelmed with the wonder of his surprising discovery. It was nearly beyond belief; almost he doubted the reality of what his own eyes had seen.

BUT there was no doubting his own presence here in this strange place. The unreality of it—the strangeness of his own sensations—were borne in upon him. Where was he? he asked. What was this soft cushion upon which he rested so lightly? He tried to sit up and found that he merely twisted his body and set other eddies of light into motion.

Cautiously, he swung one arm out as far as he could reach. There was nothing there. He moved the arm

down; reached with his hand beneath him—and still there was nothing tangible! Through his mind swept a gripping fear, a wordless, incoherent terror of something he could not name. Desperately he wanted to touch something firm and solid, lay his hands upon something he knew was *real*; and he flung out arms and legs in a paroxysm of futile effort.

He seemed hung in nothingness, an utter emptiness where nothing moved; only the ghostly whirls of light that ran lazily away from his beating hands until they died silently away into darkness, swallowed up in this unspeakable horror of soundless space. And, when he had quieted again, he knew with a dreadful certainty that there was nothing there; he was suspended in a great void—immersed in an ocean of some unknown gas.

The sense of loneliness that filled him was devastating. He could have faced death as he had faced it before, unflinchingly; that was all in the day's work. But here was something that tested sanity itself. Could he but touch something substantial, he told himself, it would help him to keep a grip on reality; even to see and feel one of the winged horrors would be in a way a relief.

HIS struggles had ceased; all about him the atmosphere was quivering and writhing with whirling light that swirled and danced and mingled one glowing vortex with another. Then it, too, died; and, through the dark that was relieved only by the faint luminosity of the quiescent gas, he saw far off a point of light.

Here was something to which he could pin his eyes; something outside of himself and the horror of nothingness in which he was immersed. He stared through the window of his helmet while the light grew and expanded into nebulous, cloudy glowing that faded and was gone.

Again it came and died; and a third time. And then Chet Bullard swore loudly and harshly within the silence of his own metal sheath, while he cursed his own dullness that had kept him from instant comprehension.

That light was far away, but, "Keep moving!" Chet called, hoping that his voice might span the void. "Keep moving so I can see your light! I'll try to swim over."

He threw himself over with a convulsive jerk and flattened the palms of his hands in a breast-stroke, while he kicked with his feet against the dense atmosphere about him. And he saw with delight that the whirling ripples of light moved back of him; he felt that he was making some headway, slight though it must be.

HE saw her at last, and heard her call.

"I am swimming, too," she cried. "How wonderful to see you! This loneliness! It is horrible—unbearable!"

"I understand," Chet said; "it is pretty bad."

Then, at sound of a stifled sob, he gripped one reaching hand hard and tried to bring himself out from under the pall that numbed his own mind; he even attempted to force a note of lightness into his words.

"I've flown everything with wings," he told her, "but this is the first time I ever flew myself. Guess I was never properly designed."

Feeble, this attempt at humor; but there was none to note the strained edge in his tone, only a girl whose metal-clad hand closed in a tight hold upon his.

"You can joke—*now*," she said with a catch in her voice that showed how desperately hard she was trying to meet Chet's fortitude

and force her own words to steadiness. "That takes—real nerve. I like that!"

Then she added: "But it's hopeless; you know that. They've got us. And now that some of them have been killed they will—they will—"

And the trace of Chet's strained smile that lingered on his lips, could she have seen it, would have appeared grim.

"Whatever it was you didn't say, I agree with. I imagine the finish will not be pleasant." Once more he was facing the inevitable; and, as before, he faced it squarely and knowingly, then put it completely from his mind. There was so much he must know before that adventure's end was reached.

"Tell me," he demanded, "who are 'they'? Where are they? How many are there of them? And where have they got us? What kind of a place is this, where all natural laws are suspended, where gravitation is at zero?

"And, for heaven's sake, tell me: who are you? Where are you from? How did you get here on the Moon?"

THAT uncontrollable catch in the girl's voice had taken on a trace of brave laughter that overlay the trembling sob in her throat.

"That is a lot of information," she said, "and I am afraid it will not make much difference if you know. Oh, I wish I had some atom of encouragement for you! I do not know who you are either—and you have been so brave! You have come here, I brought you with my signals for help—brought you to your death.

"For it *is* death! This is the end of our adventuring—mine and yours as well—here at the center, the exact center of the Moon."

"Ah-h!" answered Chet Ballard softly, as understanding came to him. "I should have guessed it. The atmospheric pressure and density—and we fell past the center, then back again; we've been vibrating back and forth until we came to rest at last. And now we die! Well, it might have been worse."

He was staring out through the little window of his helmet, staring into the faintly luminous atmosphere, facing the end of his brave fling with fortune. It was an instant before he realized that there was something moving in the void. He pressed softly upon the hand he held and pointed.

"See!" he said in a hushed tone. "There is something there!"

IT took form slowly, a shapeless, round blur in the pale light. Inch by inch it drifted toward them, until Chet moved one hand abruptly and found he had created a ripple of light by which he could see more clearly. And he saw before him a bulging, membranous sac.

It had been smoothly spherical before; it heaved itself into strange protuberances as he watched. He flipped his hand to set up another vortex of light, and he saw the first rip that formed in the membrane.

Before his staring eyes the bag burst open; and Chet, who had wished for some substantial thing, even a denizen of this wild world, found his wish fulfilled. For the thin membrane tore in a score of places to release a body from within—a shapeless, huddled mass of chalk-white flesh in a wrapping of black leather that unfolded before his eyes and became wings which waved feebly in their first attempt at flight.

The pallid body, supple as a giant worm, jerked spasmodically and turned sightless eyes toward the watching Earth-folk. Then, as if drawn by some magnet, invisible in

the distance, the black wings began to beat the air, and the creature moved off in a straight line toward some unknown goal.

ANOTHER of the membraneous spheres drifted past in the light that came from those fluttering wings. A second showed in repulsive shininess. Chet was aware that there were many of the things about.

"Eggs!" he exclaimed with a disgust that partook of nausea. "And the damnable thing hatched—right here!—before our eyes!"

And the girl gave the final explanation: "The Moon is just a great shell. They lay their eggs, these half-human creatures that you saw, and attach them to the inner surface of that shell. Then at a certain period they come loose and float away. I never knew what became of them; now I understand at last."

"You know all this!" protested Chet. "How can you know it? How long have you been here?"

"I kept track of time for a while," said the voice beside him; "then I forgot it when they took Frithjof away. But it must be about five years. Five years of terror and vain hopes and wild plans for escape! And now it ends—after five years!"

And Chet Bullard, within his metal helmet, was repeating in bewilderment: "Five years! Haldgren left five years ago! What does it mean?"

Nor did he pause to realize that through his amazement was woven a thread of another hue, tinged faintly with jealousy that demanded of him: "Frithjof! Who is Frithjof who was taken away?"

Chet's mind was filled with a confusion of questions that jostled one another to silence when he tried to give them expression. And there was little time for questioning.

HE saw other floating eggs whose membraneous coverings had turned leathery and opaque. And he saw white phantom figures who gathered those eggs. One came near till Chet could make out the repulsive face and black, staring eyes with their fiery red center. It was one of the things that had captured him; he saw it move swiftly on broad wings. It held a leathery egg in its curled-claw hands while its long tail whipped around and laid the egg open with one slash of a sharp spiked point.

One more of the young of this horrible species was liberated and went winging away into the dark, only the whirls of light in the atmosphere marking the beating of its wings.

Chet's eyes followed it to see far out beyond a light that expanded as it drew near. The beaten atmospheric gas was whipped to cold flame where some ten or a dozen phantom demons came swiftly on toward the waiting humans.

They were swarming about in an instant. Chet had no time for even a shouted warning before he felt himself seized by their long, bony claws. Then a net of rough-fibered rope was flung about him, and he felt it draw tight as the winged beasts lifted him up and out into the void.

"Wrong again!" Chet told himself ruefully. "We don't die at the center of the Moon, after all!" But, as the whipping wings drove whirling blasts of violet light back upon him he could find nothing of comfort in the thought that some different experience still lay ahead.

CHAPTER VII

The Gateway to Hell

SPUD O'MALLEY, at the controls of the ship, held the craft in a vertical lift while his eyes clung in horrible fascination

to the mirrors that showed from a lower lookout the volcanic floor falling away. Amazement had almost stifled his breathing, until at last he let go a long breath that ended in a curse.

"The outrageous, damned things!" he breathed. "Jumping, they were, and leaping, and flying on their leather wings like a lot of black bats out o' hell! And I'm thinkin' that's where they've taken Chet Bullard, and never again will he hold a ship like 'twas in the hollow of his hand, and him settin' it down like a feather!

"And: 'Fly back home!' he says to me. I can do it, too; thanks to his teachin'. But fly back and leave that bhoy in the hands of those murderin' devils! — 'tis little he knows the Irish!"

He was talking half under his breath, murmuring to himself as if it helped him to see clearly the situation that must be faced.

"But to get to him—that's the trouble. I saw a big door go shut in that stone floor. They're cunnin', clever beasts; I'll say that for 'em. And there was a raft of 'em; and plenty more down in hell where they live, I've no doubt."

He moved forward on the ball-control, and the great ship swept like a silvery shadow through the night toward the distant, lighted crater rim. This he could see clearly, but the other side of the ring of mountains was black with shadow.

And, far out beyond, spread like a cloud over all the desolate world, was blackness. Spud drove the ship up another five thousand feet, and still that darkness spread out in inky pools where only an occasional mountain peak caught the flat rays of the sun.

AND what had Chet called these dark areas? "Lake of Dreams" and "Lake of Death." Spud's superstitious mind was a-quiver with dread and an ominous premonition to which the empty, frozen wastes below him gave added force.

"I'll have to wait," he told himself. "The light of the Moon—I mean the Earth—is bright, but not bright enough. I'll just wait till the Sun climbs higher. When it shines down into that hole that is the gateway to hell—and well I know it—then I can see what is there. Then, maybe, I can find some way to get inside; and I hope the lad lives till I get there."

He circled back; swept down in a long, leisurely flight, and came again to the place of gently sloping rock where Chet had first landed. And he searched till he found the identical spot and laid the ship down on a level keel.

Far away the Sun was gilding the hard outlines of mountains that ringed them in. Spud did not know how long he must wait. Had he realized that it must be a matter of days it is probable he would have donned the metal suit and started out. But instead he buried himself in a careful investigation of the storeroom and a check-up of ammunition and supplies that were there.

THE lunar day, as all Earthmen know, is a matter of nearly fifteen of Earth's days. Spud O'Malley was wild with impatience when at last the Sun was striking less flatly across the land and he knew that the time had come when he could start.

He had sensed the change that took place in the world outside; from the lookouts of the control room he had seen the bare rocks lose their white markings of hoar frost and at last actually quiver with heat as the Sun beat upon them. He had seen the growing things that crept from every crevice and hollow — pale, colorless

masses that threw out long tendrils which licked across the hot rocks as if hungry for the nourishment the thin air brought.

Spud knew nothing of the carbon dioxide which these pale green growths could combine with water under the Sun's hot rays and build into vegetable tissue. But he marveled again and again at the hungry things that made a mesh of ropy strands across the smooth area about the ship. They even hung in drooping masses from the weird rocks beyond; and, so light they were, their raised their heads hungrily in air, while the corded teadrils even threw themselves in contorted writhings at times when the Sun struck with increasing warmth.

"A dead world!" said Spud scornfully. "How much the scientists back there don't know! First those livin', flyin' devils; and now this! The whole place is fairly wrigglin' with life."

IT was then that he made one last flight over the inner crater and saw light on the floor of stone in the funneled depths. Then he sent the ship like a rocket down to the shelf of rock where Chet had begun his descent; and he worked with trembling fingers to adjust the metal suit and regulate the oxygen supply.

He waited only to strap a couple of detonite pistols about him; then, with never a backward look, he let himself out through the air-locking doors and started pell-mell toward the inner crater.

Like Chet, he had learned to gage his tremendous strength; like the master pilot, he threw himself down the rocky slope. But where Chet had leaped and stumbled in the darkness, O'Malley worked in full light.

He came at last to the rocky floor where molten stone in ages past had hardened to seal the throat of this vent. Hundreds of feet across, Spud estimated; smooth in appearance from above, but broken with deep crevasses and excrescences where hot, fluid stone had frozen in its moment of bubbling turbulence. And, in one place, where the floor was smooth, Spud found what he was searching for: a circular, metal ledge that projected above the smooth rock; and, within it, a still smoother sheet of what appeared to be hammered metal.

"A door it is," whispered the pilot, half-fearful of listening ears, "and the gateway to Hell!" He grinned broadly at some thought. "And here I've been told 'twas, of all places, the easiest to get into; one little slip from grace and there you were! Sure, and the priests were as wrong as the scientists. It must be Heaven that's easy to crash, for the front door of Hades is shut fast without even a keyhole to peep through."

THEN his face sobered to its customary homely lines. "The poor bhoy!" he exclaimed. "I've got to get in some way. I wonder how hard and thick it is."

He was raising a mass of black, shining rock in his hands—a fragment that his strength would not have moved a fraction of an inch on Earth. He steadied it above his head, preparing to crash it upon the metal door; then waited; stared incredulously at the black metal sheet; lowered the great stone silently and turned to leap mightily yet with never a sound for the shelter of an upflung saw-toothed ridge.

And, from its shelter, he watched the black door swing smoothly into the air, while, from the gaping black mouth of the pit beneath, incredible man-shapes of fish-belly white drew themselves up to the edge of the pit and perched there, where they might stretch their long necks into the light of the Sun.

Below them, Spud saw, dangled long, rat-like tails; and their wings, black and leathery, hung down too from their backs or dragged on the rocks behind where some three or four of the owl-eyed creatures crawled out and walked across the rock toward the place where an Irish pilot waited and stared with unbelieving and horrified eyes from the concealment of his rocky fort.

CHAPTER VIII

The Fires

GREAT vortices of whirling light rolled out to either side in an endless pyrotechnical display to show the power of those flailing wings that were bearing Chet and his companion through the dark void—bearing them to some destination Chet could not envisage.

His body turned in space at times, and he saw the spreading cone of luminous gas behind them like the wake of a great ship in a phosphorescent sea. The hiss and threshing of many wings came unceasingly. Once he swung close to another body clad like his own and, like him, enmeshed in a net. And he saw in the light of the luminiferous air the girl's wide, staring eyes. Then she was gone, and all about was only the whip of wings and the flashing whirls of light.

He tried to form some picture of this sphere through whose center, empty but for this gas, he was being swung. That first fall had carried him down the tube of some volcanic blow-pipe; he had fallen straight for what seemed like hours. And that had been through the crust of this great, hollow globe. Then the center!—but of this he dared make no estimate; he knew only that the huge leather wings were threshing the dense air in an untiring rhythm and that he was being carried for a tremendous distance at remarkable speed.

It became soothing, that rushing, swinging sweep of his body through space. There was death ahead, without doubt—but what of that? He was sleepy—sleepy—and beyond this nothing mattered. Just to sleep, to drift off in spirit into a void like this through which he was swinging. . . .

And so traveled Chet Bullard, one time Master Pilot of Earth, through the heart of another world—on and endlessly on, while leather-winged demons dragged him after, flying straight away from the center of the Moon toward a place and events unknown.

But Chet Bullard had ceased to note the passing hours or the swirling gases that came alight at the beating of those wings; he was asleep in a stupor that was as deep as it was timeless.

HE opened his eyes at last; it seemed but a moment that he had slept. But now there was no rushing hiss of air, nor was he being lifted in a great net. He lay instead upon a support of some kind, and about him all was still.

Not at first did he observe the exquisite carving of the yellow bed on which he lay; that came later. The fact that its massive gold and its scrollwork of inlaid platinum were worth a fortune meant nothing to him then. His eyes were held by the immensity of the great room and the intricate series of arches that made up a vaulted ceiling.

It shone with a light of its own, that carved ceiling; no least lovely detail was lost. And Chet found his eyes roving from one to another of angel figures that seemed suspended in air.

The white of purest alabaster was theirs; and their outstretched wings, too, were white. He realized confusedly that they were like the black demons—like them and yet entirely unlike. For, where

the black-winged ones had been ugly of feature, with every mark of degeneracy, these were the ultimate of loveliness in face and form. Figures of men he saw, stalwart and strong, yet perfectly proportioned; and the others—the women and girls—were superhuman in their ethereal beauty.

"Angels!" breathed Chet, and turned his head slowly to see the exquisite figures that seemed hovering above the whole vast room in silent benediction. "Angels — no less! And they're carved from stone! Those black devils never did it. What does it mean? What does it mean?"

And not until then did Chet realize a wonderful thing. So enthralled had he been by the wonder of this hovering angel band he had not realized that he was seeing them with no helmet glass between; he was lying disrobed on his couch of pure gold.

FOR an instant panic seized him. Without his helmet and the oxygen supply he must strangle. And then he knew that he was breathing naturally in an atmosphere like that of Earth but for the strange fragrances that swept to him on the soft, warm air.

He arose slowly to his feet and steadied himself with one hand on the scrollwork of the bed. Then memories rushed in upon him, and he lived again the long sickening fall through the heart of this world, the finding of the girl of mystery, hung like himself in the immensity of the inner world, their capture; and the band of black-winged ones who swung them through space in nets that drew tightly about them.

The girl! Again he saw the clear look from those eyes of blue. It was she who had signaled; it was she whom he had come through vast space to rescue. And now she was lost!

Chet stared slowly about him at the magnificence of the tremendous room. He saw more delicate figures done in inlay on the walls; he knew that he was in a place whose beauty and wealth should have set his nerves tingling; and all he sensed was the loneliness of this place where he was the only living occupant.

HE found his Earth-clothes beside the golden couch. He had put them on and was examining the suit and helmet to learn with relief that they were intact when the first sound came to him. From an arched entrance across the room were coming shuffling figures whose black wings were wrapped about their chalk-white bodies. Only their pallid faces showed, ghastly and inhuman, as the eyes glowed redly from their deep black sockets. Chet still held the suit in his hands as the black-winged ones came toward him across the floor, and he carried it with him as he moved mechanically where they led him with the pull of their claw-like hands upon his arms.

"No gun!" he told himself hopelessly. "Not a chance if I put up a fight! They've got me and got me right. Now what I need to do is to be good—lay low—find out something about all this, and find *her!*" He could not name the girl whose eyes were haunting him in their appealing loveliness; he could think of her only as the mystery girl, and he accepted without surprise or denial the fact that the finding of her outweighed all else that this new world might hold for him.

As the shuffling figures closed about him and led him away he found relief in the thought of his ship, of Spud's safety, and of his return to the world that they both knew as home.

"Never again for me!" said Chet softly beneath his breath. "But

Spud will get there. Perhaps he is there now—no telling how long I have slept!"

HE saw it all so plainly: saw the Irish pilot bringing the ship to rest at the great Hoover Terminal. And he saw, too, a relief expedition that would be organized by Harkness and that must arrive too late. To suppose that any help might reach him here inside this wild world was too much; Chet looked with judicially appraising eyes at the things about him and could not allow himself to be deceived. There was no hope; but he made one resolve and made it grimly in words that never reached his lips.

"Give me half a chance at them, Walt," he promised, "and if ever you do get inside here, you'll know where I've been. I'll find the girl first—I must do that—then I'll give these devils something to remember me by before they put us away for good!" And now the face of the pilot was almost happy as he stared at the snarling, twisted features of those that led him unresistingly through a series of stone rooms that seemed without beginning or end. He even disregarded the spiked tails that whipped at him with heavy blows to hurry him along.

"If I had a gun," he told them inaudibly, "I'd take you on right now. But you got that, or I lost it in the scuffle, so I'll just twist your scrawny necks in my bare hands when the time comes. And it's coming, you ugly devils! It's coming!"

Their claws pulled roughly at him to hurry him into another room. And where before he could see nothing of a beautiful room because of the absence of a pair of smiling eyes, he now saw nothing else for their presence. For, across the great hall, whose walls and ceilings glowed softly with yellow light, his eyes swept unerringly to a slim figure in a pilot's suit—to an oval face and blue eyes and red lips that could still curve into a trembling smile of welcome as he drew near.

FORGOTTEN was the grip of sharp-spiked, clawing hands; even the anticipated sweets of revenge were lost from Chet's mind. He knew only that he had found her—the mystery girl—and that the blue eyes were locked with his in an intimacy that set something deep within him into a turmoil of emotion.

And instead of the countless questions he had expected to launch upon her when again they met, he found his lips trembling and wordless—until they uttered one hoarse ejaculation of: "Thank God!"

But the girl seemed to understand, for she reached one slender hand to touch him lightly upon the arm where those gripping claws had been. "Yes," she whispered; "I was afraid, too—afraid for you!"

More whispered words, but they were lost to Chet in the babel of sound that engulfed them. Those who had brought him had moved silently, and the throng of some hundred or more that waited beside the girl had been mute. But now they burst into a chorus of shrill cries whose keenness stabbed at Chet's ears.

A pandemonium of the same high-pitched squeals he had heard before—this was all that he could distinguish at first. Then the shrill sounds broke into words and unintelligible phrases, and he knew they were talking among themselves.

THEY quieted at a sound from the girl. She had turned to face them, and she forced her own soft voice into a shrill pitch as she spoke to them. Their clamor broke

out once more as she ceased, but it was more subdued. Chet could hear her as she turned toward him.

"They think you are Frithjof," she explained.

"You talked with them?" asked Chet incredulously.

"But certainly; have I not been here for five years? They have their language—but enough of that now. They are angry. They seat Frithjof away; they tell me now that he escaped; they think you are he—that you have changed your appearance with magic—that the ship they saw was summoned by your magic. They say they will kill us both; throw us to the fires!"

"Wait!" almost shouted Chet to make himself heard above the din of shrieking voices. "I've got to know! Who are you? Who is Frithjof? How did you get here? Where are you from? Tell me quickly! It may give me something to go on; it may mean a chance for delay."

And if Chet had not been out of breath from the shouted questions, he would surely have been left breathless by their amazing answer.

"I thought you knew," said the girl as the din of shrillness subsided. There seemed to Chet a note of hurt in her voice. "I thought you knew, that you had come here knowing. I am Anita, and Frithjof is my brother—Frithjof Haldgren! I stowed away on his ship; he did not know. I was only thirteen then. . . . And now, is Frithjof forgotten back in that world that we left?"

Again that note of disappointment; the pilot sensed it even through the tenseness of the moment when both Earth-folk knew that death stood close at their side. He answered quickly:

"I came for your brother. I saw your signals. I came to find Haldgren and to save him. And I have failed. But if death, as you say, is all we can expect, let me say this: 'I have failed, but I have found you; and whatever comes I am content.'"

THE blue eyes were wide; they were looking at him with a searching glance that changed to a childish candor while a flush stole over the pale face. She reached out one hand toward his. "We could have been happy," she said simply; "and now—now we must face the fires—together."

"I don't know just what you mean by that," spoke Chet softly, "but, whatever it is, there is a little matter of a fight first."

He released her hand and moved swiftly between her and the nearer of the throng; and his blood pulsed strongly through him as he faced a battery of hostile red eyes and knew that he was preparing for his last fight.

A hand clutched at his arm. "Not now!" begged Anita Haldgren's voice. "Wait! They will not all come. I too, can fight; but we cannot face so many!"

The rat-tails of the nearest beasts were whipping to and fro; the eyes in the chalky faces were like living coals where the ashes have been freshly blown. Chet stepped back beside the girl, and he made no protest as the black claws seized him and the sharp talons dug into his flesh. But he whispered to the one who was hurried along beside him: "You are right; I'll be good as long as we stay together. But if not—if we're separated—if they take you away—"

And the girl nodded quick agreement with his unspoken words.

CHET set his teeth together to make more bearable the pain of those gripping claws; but the hurt was easier to bear when he saw that the girl was more com-

fully treated. She was close ahead as his captors hustled him from this room into others and yet others, all carved from the solid rock.

What a people this must be who could do such work as this! Again the sense of amazement struck through to Chet despite the pain—amazement and a feeling of an inexplicable incongruity when he saw the leather-winged creatures that had him in their grip. And again there were figures high overhead—white, floating figures on pinions of pure white; their faces, kindly and serene, looked down upon the motley throng.

"Look above you!" gasped Chet. "Anita! What are they? Not like these devils!"

And the girl ahead half-turned her head to answer: "Ancestors! A thousand generations back! They have come down to this state now—degenerated."

Chet saw one of the beasts who held her jerk her sharply about, and he knew that his remaining questions must wait—wait forever, perhaps, and remain unsaid.

They came at last to a place where Chet found the answer to one question he had not dared ask; a place where gaping chasms in the floor glowed red with the wrath of unquenched fires. And the girl, Anita, when they had been placed by themselves against a glowing, lighted wall of rock, stared steadily at those pits and the sulphurous fumes that vomited out at times; then turned and spoke to the pilot in a voice steady and sure.

"It will be over quickly," she assured him. "Prithjof said that the heat, like the warmth of this whole inner world, comes from the contraction of the rocks in the cold of night. There is great pressure developed . . . but he never learned the source of the light in the walls."

TALKING to still the beating of a heart pulsing with dread, perhaps! Chet had no mind for explanations. Before him were a score of yawning clefts in a rocky floor; one was larger than the rest; there were figures whose white bodies glowed red in its reflected light as they floated on black wings high above; the light of those hidden fires blazed and died intermittently. There death was waiting, while these demons — these degenerate half-men, living products of a dying race—whipped the air in a frenzy of expectation as they darted above those chasms that were like rifts in the rock roof of hell.

Chet did not answer the statements of the girl. Instead he turned and gathered her once into his arms, while his lips met hers to find a ready response. Her face, so calm and pale, was turned upward to his. And his own voice trembled at first; then was steady and firm.

"I love you. I've come a long way to tell you, and I didn't know why I came. And now it is too late.

"Anita Haldgren," he said, and let his voice linger as he repeated the name, "Anita Haldgren—a beautiful name—a beautiful soul! And now—" He released her quickly and swung to meet a rush of beastly things that half-ran, half-flew across the great room.

OUTSTRETCHED arms of white that ended in black claws! Soaring, grinning teeth in faces of dead-white flesh! Barbed tails that hissed through the air as they swung down upon him! And Chet Bullard, his blood hair shining like the gold that was inlaid and encrusted upon the walls of the room—Chet Bullard, Master Pilot, once, of a distant Earth—did not wait for the assault to reach him, but sprang in upon the beastly things with swinging fists that came

up from beneath to crash into grinning faces; to smash dully into white, scabrous flesh; or catch beneath the angle of out-thrust jaws and jolt the ghastly faces into awkward angles.

They went down before him at first. Then the long rat-tails came whipping over the demon-heads, ripping down with slashing blows on the pilot's head and shoulders. Off at one side, a dozen paces away, a slender figure tore loose from grasping claws. Chet saw it; he freed himself for an instant to leap to her side. She was tugging at a bar of gold, a scepter in the hands of a sculptured figure in the wall. It would have been a serviceable weapon, but it beat slowly. Another of the beasts was upon her as Chet sprang.

This one went down beneath the chopping right that Chet shot to a lean, white jaw; then a barbed tail caught him a blow that laid his shoulder open. Another descended—and another. The pilot sank to the floor. Anita was beside him, shielding him with her own body from the rain of blows. Then they were buried beneath a great weight of odorous bodies—till Chet, after a time, felt himself dragged to his feet.

HIS head was ringing with the shrieks of the shrill-voiced mob. He was still struggling, still fighting blindly, as the clamor ceased. Then he stood erect and motionless as he heard the voice of Anita Haldgren.

"It's Prithjof!" she cried. "Oh, my dear—my dear! It's Prithjof! I heard him! But he can't reach us—he can't help us! I will try to reason with these beasts—bargain with them—make them afraid! I will tell them it is magic."

And, as her voice, high-pitched in the language of this race, rose in protest against them, Chet heard what the girl had detected first: a sharp, metallic rapping within the wall, a rapping that was dulled by distance but whose separate blows were distinct; and he knew, with a knowledge that came from somewhere else than his bewildered brain, that the raps were forming dots and dashes. They were talking Morse!

The girl's frenzied appeal ended in a din of shrieks; a horde of man-beasts swept into the air and launched themselves in a solid mass upon the two. Chet saw Anita for one instant as he felt himself lifted in air. About him was a pandemonium of flailing wings; ahead and below was the red of hidden fires. They were being lifted out and over the pits.

One instant only, while tortured eyes smiled bravely into his; then a great pit-mouth that gaped a horrible welcome up ahead. So plainly Chet saw it! He could not tear his eyes away. He saw the red, smoking breath of it; he saw a rocky lip that shone like one great ruby.

IT was impossible! Even the blast of air that tore at him meant nothing at first! But it was happening! Before his eyes it was happening! Chet watched dumbly, incomprehendingly, as that great overhanging rock tore itself into fragments that rose screamingly into the air or fell to the depths beneath.

Another section of solid floor erupted a hundred feet across the room! The destruction was being kept away. Chet knew. And then, while a roar like all the thunders of Earth reverberated deafeningly through the rock room, the claws that gripped him relaxed their hold.

He fell, nor felt the impact of his fall. He came to his feet, ran stumblingly to the edge of the nearest pit where he threw his arms about the body of a girl and

dragged her to safety. And while he did it he was babbling in broken sentences:

"It's detonite! Your brother! . . . Where did he get it? . . . Detonite! . . . Oh, my dear—my dear!"

And his arms were tight about her while he held his body between her and the explosions that tore at the floor in an inferno of crashing explosions out beyond—until three of the demon-beasts, red with the reflected fires of that subterranean hell, flew down like black-winged bats bent on vengeance. And Chet, laughing at their numbers, sprang out with hard fists swinging in well-directed blows, and welcomed them as only an Earth-man could.

CHAPTER IX

O'Malley Investigates

SPUD O'MALLEY'S twinkling Irish eyes had seen strange sights in his years of piloting an Intercolonial freighter; he had touched at odd corners of the Earth. But never had he seen such creatures as confronted him now.

Sheltered behind a jagged ridge of volcanic rock in the inner crater of the great ring of Hercules, he stared in utter horror at the figures that approached. For to Spud, with all his inherited ancestral faith in gnomes and pixies, these bat-winged things were nothing less than people of the under world—demons from some purgatory of the Moon—devils, living and breathing, spewed out from that buried hell for a moment of relaxation from their horrid work.

And, coming directly toward him across a level lava bed, three of the things, with leather wings trailing, were approaching. Spud was unmoving; his feet might have been one with the volcanic rock on which he stood for any ability of his to raise them. Only his eyes turned slowly in their sockets to stare wildly at the three who drew near; who glimpsed his awe-stricken eyes behind his helmet glass; and who uttered shrill, screaming cries that brought the rest of the unholy crew leaping and flapping across the rocks.

And, within that helmet, Spud's lips moved unconsciously to repeat prayers he would have sworn were forgotten these many years. There was a pistol at his belt where his hand was resting; another hung at his other side. But the man made no move to defend himself; he was struck numb and nerveless, not through fear, but through that horror which comes with seeing one's most gruesome superstitions come true. Spud O'Malley, who would have laughed at devils and believed in them while he laughed, knew now that they were real. They had captured Chet; they were about to take him, too, to the hell that was their home.

AND still he did not move while the demon figures pressed closer, while their wild, shrieking cries echoed within his helmet; while they leaked their scaly tails, and at last leaped in unison upon the helpless man.

And then, with that first touch, Spur O'Malley, who had not only seen strange creatures but had fought with them, came to himself—and the hand that rested upon a detonite pistol moved like the head of a striking snake.

The roar of detonite was strained and thin in the light atmosphere of this globe; it seemed futile compared with its usual thunderous report. But its effects were the same as might have been expected on Earth!

Spud was hurled to the rocky floor, as much by the closeness of the exploding shells as by the weight of the bodies that came upon him. He fell free of the first

leaping things that went to fragments in mid-air as his pistol checked them. And he made no effort to arise, but lay prostrate, while he swung that slender tube of death about him and saw the winged beasts shattered and torn — until there were but five who ran wildly with frantic, flapping wings; and these the tiny shells from Spud's gun caught as they ran when the Irishman sprang to his feet and took careful aim across the jagged rocks.

"Saints be praised!" the pilot was saying over and over. "Saints be thanked!—even the Devil's imps can't stand up to detonite shells! And Chet, the poor lad!—his gun must have been knocked from his hand; he was fightin' in the dark, too! And they took him down there, they did!—down where I'm goin' to see if the lad is still livin'."

And Spud O'Malley, though he believed fully in the demoniac nature of these opponents and never for an instant thought but that he was descending into an inferno of the Moon, strode with steady steps toward the portal of that Plutonic region and lowered himself within.

THAT ring of metal, huge and accurately formed, made Spud pause in thought; the massive metal door that came up from below to fit that ring snugly — that, too, looked more like the work of human hands than of demons. The pilot was frankly puzzled as he tentatively moved a lever down below that door and saw the huge metal mass swing shut.

About him the walls were glowing. He saw, in the floor, another circular door, but found no lever with which to operate it. Nor did he search for one, since he could have no way of knowing that here was where Chet had gone. But, from the corridor where he stood other lighted passages led; and one slanted more steeply than the rest.

"That's the way I'm goin'," announced Spud. "I know that, and it's all I do know; I'm goin' down till I find some place where the devils live and where Chet may be."

The passage took him smoothly down. It turned at times, and smaller branches split off, but he followed the main corridor that he had selected for his route. And he paused, at last, beside a metal frame in the rock wall, where the door that fitted so tightly in the frame was not like the others he had seen. For the first ones, though cleverly fashioned and machined, were of iron, rusted red with the ages; while this one that was before him now was paneled and decorated with sweeping scrolls. And, above this portal that seemed hermetically sealed, was a white figure such as Chet had seen.

SPUD'S gaze traveled up to it slowly, and his knees were trembling as they had not done when facing the black-winged ones. "'Tis an angel," he whispered, "or the statue of one! And that explains it all. 'Tis them that has done all this—these passages, and the sweet-fittin' doors. And do they live here? I wonder. Heaven help me if I meet them, for never could I shoot at one of them, the pretty things!"

He was still gazing in rapt wonder that was near to worship when the great door began to move. He saw the first hair-line crack, and the thin line of light was like a hot wire across his eyes, so quickly did he respond. Beyond, where he had not yet gone, was a branching passage. All the walls glowed softly with light—no shelter of darkness was his—but Spud leaped for the little passage and raced down it until a turn screened him from sight.

"That's movin'!" he congratulated

himself. "What an athlete I'm becomin'!" And it was fortunate for the pilot that the ceiling was high, for his tremendous Earth-strength propelled him in unbelievable bounds.

He still moved on silently, for far ahead in the corridor something had caught his eyes. And he stopped finally beside a little car; then saw that he had been following a single rail, buried under the dust of ages on the corridor floor.

The monorail car lay on its side. At one end of it was a motor. Not a motor such as men had built, Spud confessed, but an electric motor none the less. And beyond this, where the passage ended, was a wall veined thickly with gold.

ROPY strands of the metal shone reddish-yellow in the soft light of the walls; detached pieces lay on the floor and in the car itself. Spud regarded it with amazement, but the wealth he was witnessing left him cold; another thought was forcing itself into his brain.

That thought took more definite form when another corridor took him to rooms where great metal cases were neatly stacked; other adjoining rooms held strange machinery and appliances on metal stands.

"Lab'ratories!" said the amazed man explosively. "And storehouses, too! Neither angels nor devils did this; 'tis the work of men—and I know how to get along with men. I'll go find them. Belike they have saved the lad, Chet, and he'll be waitin' to see me."

He raced back along the corridor, but stopped short at its end, where he had taken flight from the larger passage. There was sound of shrieking voices, and Spud dropped to the floor to present as small a view as possible to the half-human things that trailed their black wings past the metal entrance; then he crept cautiously to peer around the corner, when the last one had gone.

They were waiting out beyond; Spud watched them intently. They had great nets of rope in which were living things that struggled and writhed.

He saw one of the creatures stoop to break off a protruding end of pinkish, nameless substance; the thing seemed to struggle in his hands while he took it to his mouth and munched on it. Even when Spud realized that this living food was vegetation of some sort, he was still sickened with the sight of its being taken alive into the bodies of these Moon-beasts.

ONE of the ugly figures raised a black-clawed hand to seize a lever let flush into the wall. It had been concealed. Spud saw the door open; saw the waiting horde troop through, dragging their loaded nets; and he saw the door close silently, while the actuating lever moved back to its former position.

And Spud, speaking half aloud, counted slowly to a hundred, then another hundred, as a gage of the time while he waited for those beyond the door to move on. But at the count of two hundred his eager hands were upon the lever, while his eyes were hungry to stare beyond the opening door.

They found nothing but emptiness when the door swung wide. Another room of luminous walls; another door in the farther wall. The man moved slowly through the doorway one cautious step at a time and stared about.

He found a lever like the others, moved it—and saw the door close silently behind him. Another lever was near the second door; he pulled carefully, steadily, upon it.

There was no movement of the door, but something had occurred

as he knew by the hissing sound that came from above his head. Its source he could not find; its result was most startling. For, where before his suit had bulged out roundly with the inner pressure of one atmosphere, it now became less taut—and it hung loosely about him when the hissing ceased.

"An air-lock," said Spud joyfully, "or I'm a rat-tailed imp myself! That means a heavier air-pressure inside. And now I *know* 'tis men folks I'm goin' to see!"

THE lever moved easily now, and the second door swung open and closed behind him as before. Spud tore recklessly at the fastening of his suit, regardless of the fact that an increased pressure might still come from some gas that would mean death to a human. But, like Chet, he found the air fragrant and pure, and he rid himself of the encumbering suit, strapped the pistols at his waist, rolled the suit to a bundle he could sling over one shoulder, and moved carefully as a cat as he went forward through a corridor that led down and still down.

As he went the empty labyrinth of halls filled him with a horrible depression; yet there was beauty everywhere—beauty whose delicacy of curve and color filled even the untrained mind of Spud O'Malley with a thrill of delight.

There were halls and vast rooms without number; there were carvings that glowed with a light of their own—figures so filled with the very spirit of livingness that they seemed stepping out from the cold walls to greet him; there were more celestial hosts of purest white poised apparently in mid-flight.

There were marvelous, rioting waves of color that pulsed and throbbed through the walls and the very air of some rooms; and there were articles of furniture—carved tables, chairs—objects whose purpose Spud could not guess. But, except for the occasional sound of shrill, squeaking voices in the distance, there was no sign of the presence of the builders, the men Spud had hoped to find.

And he knew at last that his quest was hopeless. The dust of uncounted centuries that lay thickly upon all was evidence as convincing as it was mute.

"There's naught but the devils!" Spud despaired. "The others—saints be helpin' of them!—have been gone for more years than a man dares think of. So, the devils it is; I'll follow them—I'll go where they are. But I'm not so sure at all of findin' the lad now."

THAT high-pitched chattering that had come to him at times was his only guide now. It seemed echoing in greater volume from one passage that slanted down more sharply than the rest. Spud followed it, clinging with hands and feet to the steep-pitched floor; but some sudden impulse seized him and compelled him to stop at intervals while he drew a pistol from his belt. Its grip was of steellike that rang sharply as a bell when he struck it upon the walls. And he tapped out the general call of the Service time after time; then strained his faculties in eager listening until he went hopelessly on.

But he repeated the call. "For the lad may hear it and be heartened," he argued. "And if he's free to do it he'll answer—though I think I'd break down and cry with joy did I hear an answerin' rap."

And still the chattering grew louder, while the watching, creeping man moved stealthily on. A wave of gas came to him once and set him choking, while far ahead he saw a reflected glow more red than the pale, lucent shimmering of the walls.

He stopped dead still as once more there flooded through him a thousand unnamed fears of this domain of the Evil One where he would trespass. But he forced his feet to carry him on until he could peer down through a rift in the rock floor to behold another room whose walls glowed redly with the light of fires far down in hot-throated pits.

THERE were figures whose white bodies shone as redly in that glow—figures that floated on outspread leather wings of dead black. Small wonder that the mind of Spud O'Malley found here the confirmation of his worst fears; small wonder that his trembling lips whispered: "'Tis Hell! 'Tis Hell, at last!"

But there was that which froze his quivering nerves to cold quiet, which set his lips into a grim, straight line and held him motionless above the opening from which he saw the room below—as, from a flurry of bodies against one far side, he saw a girl emerge.

She was in the hands of the black-winged beasts who carried her into the air then swung out toward the fiery pit. And Spud's incredulous: "Oh, the poor, beautiful darlin'!" rose unconsciously to his lips to die away in a quick-drawn breath. For, from the mass of bodies, another figure was tossed up into the air to be gripped by black, waiting claws—and Spud knew that he was seeing Chet Bullard, fighting, struggling, in the grasp of these demons from the Pit.

THE fumes from that inferno rose straight up. They passed out at another funnel-shaped throat except for an occasional eddy that whirled back toward the watching man. But Spud O'Malley, hanging precariously from that opening above, knew nothing of the sulphurous fumes or of the tight band they clamped about his throat. He was taking careful aim at the first of the flying beasts, found Chet in his line of fire, and snapped forward his pistol to fire at the lip of the pit instead. And he slipped forward the continuous discharge lever that caused the pistol to shake in his hand as it emptied its capacious magazine in a furious rain of bullets whose every end was tipped with the deadliest explosive of Earth.

The floor rose up toward him in a spouting volcano of fire, while Spud glared wildly through glazed and blinded eyes and swung his pistol to rake the flying horde where he knew Chet was not.

He saw, through the haze that was sweeping before him, Chet's sprawled body on the floor; he saw him leap to his feet and rush to the rescue of the girl. Then the empty pistol slipped from Spud's nerveless hand; and his other, that had clung with unshakable grip to a sharp edge of rock, relaxed, while he plunged headlong toward the floor below.

CHAPTER X

One Stroke for Freedom

IN that subterranean chamber of the Moon, where the angry red of still deeper fires flared fitfully; where winged demons, like evil creatures of a drug-crazed dreamer's mind, darted shrieking through the sulphurous air, it was a slender, blue-eyed girl who took control of events.

She it was who, when the explosions of detonite had ceased, saw the fall of a body from high above. She saw it strike upon a mound of dead Moon-beasts; saw the homely, human features of the body rolled to the floor; and it was she who threw herself upon it protectingly when one of the enemy

wounded dragged his broken wings trailing across the stone that he might reach that human face with his distended claws.

"A man!" Anita Haldgren screamed. "It's a man—help me!" And Chet was beside her in an instant to drag the limp body to safety.

"Spud!" he shouted. "It's Spud O'Malley! He never went back! He came down here to save us!"

He grabbed up the gun where it had fallen; saw the empty magazine; then flung himself down beside the unconscious figure of Spud while he tore at the fastenings of the second weapon.

"His suit!" he shouted to the girl. "Get his suit! It's there where he fell! Bring yours and mine, too!"

He was hardly able to gage his own strength here where all weights were one-sixth of their equivalent on Earth. He stooped and swung the chunky body of Spud across his shoulder as easily as he would have lifted a child. And, having done it, he was entirely at a loss as to where to go.

Across the great room was a throng of leaping, flapping things: more were pouring in from open doors. Chet stood hesitant and bewildered, until Anita spoke.

"Come!" she called, and darted toward a narrow entrance.

THE clamorous shrieking from the horde of Moon-beasts marked their swooping assault upon the two, and Chet paused to send them three shots that checked the advance. Then, with the body of Spud held tightly, he sprang where Anita had gone.

She was waiting, but gave Chet no chance to question her. "Come!" she commanded again, and ran on as before. But, as Chet gained her side, she offered between gasping breaths an explanation.

"Five years they kept us . . . like animals in a cage . . . but there was a place . . . a sacred place . . . they let us go there. . . . And they let us make signal lights from outside . . . they called it magic.

"And now Frithjof has escaped . . . he will go to the sacred room . . . only there would be be safe. . . ."

They had turned and twisted through narrow passages. Anita, it seemed, was plotting a course through less frequented thoroughfares of this strange city. But they came at last to a vast auditorium into which they peered from a half-opened door.

The room was of preposterous size, and Chet marveled at the minds that had conceived and wrought so tremendous an undertaking. And he saw plainly in his own mind the throngs of serene-faced beings who must have folded their white wings softly about them to gather there for worship. But more plainly still he saw the jostling, squealing crowd that was there that instant before his eyes.

Hundreds of them—thousands, it might be—and the sound of their shrill voices made hideous echoes from the high-flung ceiling of the great hall. The dry rustling of their leather wings was an incessant rush of sound.

SOME who seemed to be leaders stood above the rest on a platform which formed the base of a terraced formation against the far wall of the room. Even at a distance Chet could see and wonder at the simple beauty of that place of metals and jewels where the great ones of an earlier race had once stood.

Back of those who harangued the crowd the terraces built themselves up to a pyramid against the rock wall; and on either side,

opening upon the platform base, was a doorway of noble proportions, whose metal doors of burnished reds and browns were closed.

"The sacred room," whispered Anita, "beyond those doors. Pritbjof has closed them. He is there. I know it—I know it!"

Chet was still holding the body of O'Malley. Only his choked breathing showed that he still lived, but now he stirred and struggled in Chet's grasp, while he struck out blindly and hoarse sounds came from his throat.

Chet clapped one hand over the pilot's mouth. "For the love of heaven, Spud," he said fiercely, "be still! Don't speak—don't say a word! It's Chet—Chet Bullard! I've got you, we're all right!"

The pilot's struggles ceased, and Chet eased him to the floor where he sat still gasping for breath; the fumes from that place of death had been strangling in his throat.

Beside him Chet heard the girl repeating in softest tones the name she had heard for the first time.

"Chet—Chet Bullard! How odd a name! But I love it—I couldn't help but love it."

IN the great room were some who had turned toward the sound of Chet's scuffling; they were walking slowly toward the half-opened door.

"Come!" said Anita Haldgren again, and fled like a slender, golden-haired wraith down the narrow hall.

More twisting passages until Chet was hopelessly lost. But he no longer needed to carry O'Malley, who was running beside him, and he had implicit faith in the girlish guide who went before. He was not surprised when they came after many detours to a narrow door of wrought metals in white and gold, whose inset designs were worked in glowing jewels.

Nor was he surprised when the door opened in response to a series of knocks from Anita's hand that spelled S O S in the code he knew, and a man, whose long hair and beard hung about a face as handsome as that of a Viking of old, stood motionless in that doorway.

But the surprise of that flaxen-haired giant can be only imagined when a young man whom he had never seen on Earth or Moon stepped forward from his sister's side with outstretched hand.

"I am Bullard," said the slim young man, "Master Pilot of the World—or at least that was my rating up to the time I left in search of you. And now, Pilot Haldgren, we've a ship outside, and, if you'd care to go back with us—"

And with equal casualness the blond Viking replied: "You came in search of us! You saw our signals! After all this time! Yes, we shall be glad to go back with—we shall be glad—yes—"

But his deep, rumbling voice broke into something like a sob, and he turned with outstretched arms to stumble blindly toward his sister, who buried her face in his torn and ragged blouse.

"YOU came in search of us—you came through space just to find and rescue us!" Haldgren, it seemed, could not recover from the effects of this unbelievable fact. He was gripping hard at the hand of Chet Bullard, while his other great arm was thrown about the shoulders of Spud O'Malley.

"But, now that you are here, what is to be done? Every exit will be guarded; we are shut off from the outer world by a hundred locked doors and by thousands of those beasts."

He took his arm from Spud's shoulder to point toward the great doors, beyond which was a rising clamor of shrill sound.

"They will break in here soon; they would have been here before had they known of the old lost entrance of the priests that Anita and I found. We're as bad off as ever, I am afraid. There will be no holding them now."

"I can hold some," said Chet, and touched his weapon. Haldgren nodded his shaggy head.

"Some, but not many of the thousands we must face before ever we fight our way through to the outer world. No, my friend Bullard, that will never save us; we are doomed!"

But Chet, unwilling to accept or share the other's convictions, was seeing again the great room beyond those doors—a room of vast proportions; of high-arched, vaulted ceiling where sweeping curves all centered and ended in one tremendous central point. It hung down, that point, a blazing pendant—an inverted keystone; through some magic of that ancient people all the colors of the spectrum had been made to ebb and flow like rainbows of living light.

BUT something deeper than the beauty of this had impressed Chet. A master pilot does not study design of structures, even structures meant for travel through the air, without gaining knowledge of architectural fundamentals; his mind, subconsciously, had been following strains and stresses through those super-imposed curves. He turned abruptly to Haldgren with a question.

"It seemed to me when I was following Anita that we climbed upward: we were always running upward through the passages. We must be near the surface of the Moon; is that true?"

Haldgren nodded slowly. "I think so—yes! In the great room out there are windows of quartz high in the ceiling. You could not see them from where you were, but they are there. I have seen them lighted; I think it was the light of the sun."

"In that case," said Chet quietly, "I will ask you to open those doors."

"But they will come in!" the big man protested.

"They will not come in."

Chet turned to the girl. "I will ask you, my dear, to accompany me—if you have faith."

And, to that, Anita Haldgren granted not even a word of reply. She moved more swiftly than her brother to a controlling lever in the wall . . . and the ponderous doors swung slowly back.

BEYOND those opening doors a din of shrieks went abruptly still. They rose again in a squeaking babel of amazement and again were silenced as Chet Bullard stepped through the arch. Beside him was the slender figure of Anita; following was a stocky man whose unhandsome face was alight with a broad grin.

"Get to it, my bboy!" Spud O'Malley was saying. "I don't know what you're up to, but you'll be countin' me in—and here's hopin' you give those devils hell!"

And, behind them all, in great strides that brought him up with the rest, came Haldgren, recovered now from the stupefaction that had held him momentarily. The four went silently where Chet led to the highest point of the great terraced rostrum.

It was a stepped pyramid, Chet found, split in half and the half placed against the wall. There was a stairway of smaller steps where priests, some thousands of years before, had made their way to the top. And the dust of centuries arose in smoky puffs as the four trod that path where the holy ones had gone. Below them the silence

was ending in sibilant hissing calls as the black-winged beast-men watched that procession to the heights. Some few had launched themselves into the air. Chet saw when he turned.

"Tell them to go back," he said to Anita; "tell them to listen to what I have to say!" There followed immediately the sound of Anita's soft voice distorted to shrill sounds that echoed throughout the hall.

"Tell them now," said Chet when the hall was still, "that I have come from another world. Tell them that I hold the thunderbolts of their ancient gods in my hands. Then tell them if they permit us to depart we will go and leave them in peace. But if they try to harm us, the temple of their gods will be destroyed, and they, too, shall die. Tell them!"

THERE was something of unwonted solemnity in the voice of the master pilot—something of quiet power and the dignity that became a messenger of the gods—as he gave his orders and faced the throng.

And there was the patience of a god who is sickened of slaughter as he faced the discordant din and the threatening forward surge of the demon throng below. The girl had spoken, and the air was black with their threshing wings, while still Chet waited with outstretched hand.

To the creatures below—the things half-men and half-beasts—the shining tube in that extended hand meant nothing of threat. And even to the Irish pilot, who stood silently watching, the gesture seemed futile.

"You've overplayed your hand, lad," he said in a tone of despair. "'Tis no little gun like that will stop them now!"

He was watching that hand and the shining tube; watching in amazement as he saw it swing slowly up toward the advancing horde risen level with them in the air—up above their massed blackness of wings—on and up, until the tube was pointing toward the base of a carven pendant, whose bleeding colors were fairy lights at play.

And still the weapon waited until the snarling faces of the enemy were close. Then the pistol cracked once, and the roar of its exploding shell came thundering after.

For an instant all motion ceased; the very wings of the flying beasts seemed frozen rigid in mid-flight. Then the whole of the vast room was in motion.

A RUSH of escaping air whirled upward the black-winged monsters in an inverted maelstrom of shrieking winds. And, falling to meet them, came an enormous pendant whose rioting colors seemed glorying in their own death. And with that came the swift disintegration of the vaulted arches where one central supporting point of their intricate mass had been shattered; till, with a crashing avalanche of sound that obliterated the thundering echoes of the detonite charge, the entire ceiling, that seemed now like the roof of a mighty world, roared down to destruction.

The pyramidal rostrum was at one side. A cascade of shattered rock fell like a curtain before it—a kindly curtain that hid from human sight the hideous slaughter of a demoniac mob. It was still falling; the imprisoned air was gathering added force to rush upward, screaming as if the very winds were insane with joy at their release, when the great arms of Frithjof Haldgren closed about the others of the group and half carried them, half hurled them, down the slope.

THE echoing clang of great doors was still with them as the bellowing voice of Haldgren was heard.

"Get into your suits! The internal pressure is lost." Even as he spoke the big man was clutching at his throat, though the closing doors of the sacred room had given them respite. "Quick! They have emergency doors. They will close them—but this part is cut off. In only minutes there will be no air!"

But it was Chet who snapped shut the closure of Anita Haldgren's suit before he pulled on his own. And he grinned happily through the glass of his helmet as he saw the others safely encased, while their suits slowly bulged as the pressure of the air about them went down and their own tanks of oxygen took up the task of maintaining one atmosphere of pressure.

In silence the great doors of the sacred room swung back; in silence, as before, the Earth-folk passed through where chaos had reigned. Chet checked them; he threw one arm clumsily around the figure of Anita Haldgren while he turned to her brother.

"The door is open, Frithjof Haldgren," he said, and pointed upward at the black vault of the heavens where a massive ceiling had been. In that immensity of space, framed in the torn outlines of a shattered world, shone a great globe—a globe like a giant moon. The Earth, unbelievably bright, was beckoning them once more.

"The door is open," Chet repeated; "do you still wish to go home?"

CHAPTER XI

"Bullard, of the I. B. C.!"

THE controls of a meteor ship held steady without the touch of the pilot's hand. Chet Bullard was staring at a radiocone on the instrument board in the control room where a voice from some super-powered station was calling. His own radio had been crackling a call, and now this response was coming across the void.

"Orders from the Stratosphere Control Board: You will proceed at once to New York. Radiobeacon 2X12 will guide you down. Your message received and we acknowledge report of the finding of the space-flyer, Pilot Haldgren. Do not discharge any passengers and land nowhere else than at New York without direct orders of the Board. Keep your directional signal on full power; our cruisers will pick you up in the highest level. Signed: Commander of Air."

Spud O'Malley, it was, who broke the silence of the room where only the sound of the terrific exhaust came thinly through.

"May divils confound him! And it's back on the Moon with those other beasts I'm wishin' I was. At least a man can get close enough to slam them in their ugly faces; but the Commander and his cruisers! Sure, there's nothin' we can do!"

"Just take our medicine," said Chet Bullard quietly. [illegible] have proved him wrong; Haldgren, here, is the living evidence of that. And I said I would laugh him from the Service—well, I'm not so sure of that."

"But surely," broke in Haldgren's booming voice, "there will be only praise for what you have done. I do not understand—"

"You don't know the Commander, my boy," Spud broke in dryly. "And you don't know that the lad, here, defied him to his face and ran the gantlet of his cruisers' guns to get away and go after you."

"Ah!" grunted the giant. "And now I understand. It is the old story—an incompetent man in a place of authority—"

CHET broke in.

"Not quite right; this Commander of ours has done much—he is a driver of men—but there are some of us who think he lacks vision. He can never see beyond the stratosphere he rules so ably; and his position is supreme."

"There is still the Governing Council—we will appeal—"

But the master pilot was not listening to Haldgren's words; his slim, sensitive hand was reaching for the ball control to build up still more the tremendous blast of a forward exhaust that was checking their speed and making them as heavy as if their bodies were of meteoric iron.

A forward lookout showed a black globe; its circle was rimmed with fire from the Sun that it blotted out. A hemisphere of night lay below—the black, mysterious night of a waiting Earth. But one strong signal came in on the instruments at Chet's side to show him where on that horizon was New York; and the call of a flagship of cruisers was flashing before him as the lift of the Repelling Area was felt.

"Follow!" flashed the order. "You will follow to New York!" And, through the black night, faint flashes of light marked the fleet of swift guardians of the skies that closed in, then swept downward and out—an impregnable convoy about the speeding, roaring ship.

And there was that in Chet's face as he handled the controls that brought Anita Haldgren to his side that she might lift his free hand in wordless comfort and press it to her face.

THAT venerable and beloved man, the President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, stood silent before a vast audience. Throughout the great auditorium was silence; each of the gathered thousands was listening to the shrieking sirens from the landing field on the roof overhead.

Skylights above showed the night air ablaze with red, through which the vivid green of landing signals pierced in staccato bursts. From the roof of that building to the highest level of the stratosphere the air was cleared; no craft of the Service would venture to pierce the barrage of light and radio waves that beamed that aerial shaft. And down the shaft, in a thunder of roaring exhausts, came a shining shape.

She sparkled and flashed in the crimson and green of that emergency light, and from her bow poured a tornado that blasted the air, then streamed out behind in hot gas like a comet of fire. Then the thunders died; the shining shape turned once slowly in air to show her blunt nose and cylindrical body before she settled softly as a homing bird to the embrace of great waiting arms of steel. And, inside the building, a white-haired man was saying:

"They are here! Thank God, they are here! Their radio has prepared us; our signals have guided them home. And now it is not New York, nor even the United States of America, alone who attends; the whole world will be summoned. Look!"

BEHIND, and high above him on a wall, was a radio panel. Its signal lamps went suddenly dark. The thin, blue-veined hand of the speaker was pointing.

"Only twice has the world-call flashed: once when the Moremen came and the future of the world was at stake; once when the Dark Moon crashed down from the void and the serpents of space menaced aerial traffic. And now—once again!—the whole world is summoned! Every city and hamlet of Earth—

every ship of the air and the sea—every vessel on the ocean, under the ocean, and in the air levels above—"

His voice broke sharply. From the panel there came a thin call, a quivering that was more a trembling than a sound; it reached out to touch raspingly the nerves of every listener. Then the whole board burst forth in a flash of fire where a flaming crystal leaped to life—and none could see that pulsing flame without thrilling to the knowledge that it was calling a whole world with its wordless summons.

The light died; a television detector whined as its motors came to speed; and each watcher knew that the waiting world was connected with that auditorium in New York; all that happened there—each sight and sound—was circling the globe.

An announcer's voice roared briefly before the regulator cut down on its volume.

"You are seeing the Radio-central Auditorium in New York. On the leading stage above, after a journey of five hundred thousand miles, a strange craft has settled to rest. Its pilot: Chester Bullard, once rated as Master Pilot of the World! Its journey, now safely completed: from the Earth to the Moon, and return!

"The world is waiting to greet Pilot Bullard, though of this he, as yet, is unaware. World-wide radio control is now transferred to Radio-central Auditorium in New York! They are coming! They are entering!"

BUT the thousands gathered in that great hall heard no other words from the radiocone. Their attention was focused upon the broad stage, where, descending from a lift, a strange group stepped out upon the stage, stood an instant in startled wonder that was near embarrassment, then took the seats to which they were shown.

And again the venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale was speaking.

"It is less than a month since I stood here before you, when, as again is true to-night, the entire personnel of the executives of the Stratosphere Control Board was gathered to do honor to the pioneers of space—the discoverer—"

On the stage near the speaker, Chet Bullard stared in consternation at a girl in a pilot's suit as grimed and ragged as his own. His gaze passed on to the set features of Pilot O'Malley—to the blue-eyes of a flaxen-haired giant—then on to where Walt Harkness and Diane, his wife, sat regarding him with happy smiles. Dimly Chet heard the man at the speakers' stand.

"—and on that other occasion, Mr. Bullard refused a decoration tendered him and marking him as the first to travel through airless space.

"I have here"—the speaker smiled slightly as he extended his hand where a jewel flashed fire from a velvet case—"the identical jewel and medal. And to-night, while the peoples of Earth are gathered throughout the world to do honor to Mr. Bullard, it has been given to me the proud privilege of welcoming him home."

HE turned and held out a beckoning hand toward Chet. In a daze the younger man arose and moved beside the one who had called him.

"And now, Chester Bullard, on behalf of the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth, I greet you: Pilot of the Stratosphere no longer—but Pilot of Endless Space! The world welcomes you; and, through me, it places in your hands this jewel.

"But you will observe that we older ones may still learn, and we do not repeat our former mistake. We hand you this medal, emblematic of the first penetration of space, to do with as you will."

The thin hand was shaking as the speaker turned and swept the audience with one all-inclusive gesture.

"To you who are before me now; to you out beyond wherever parallels of longitude and latitude are known—I present the Columbus of the Stars!—Chester Bullard!"

And suddenly Chet found himself alone in a pandemonium of sound. From the countless faces that blurred into one unrecognizable sea came a roar of human voices like waves thundering against storm-worn cliffs; above the clamor was the sound of shrieking sirens; and through all, when it seemed that no other sound could be heard, came the full-volume, nerve-stunning clangor from the radiocone's wide-opened throat as the trumpets and brass of all the monster bands of Earth broke forth, under radio control, in one synchronous song—till even that was drowned under the roaring welcomes in strange tongues as the nations of Earth cut in.

AND Chet Bullard, his blouse still torn where a Commander of Air had ripped off a three-starred emblem of a Master Pilot, shook his blond head to clear it of the confusion that seemed beating him down. And he stared and stared, not at the rioting throng before him, but at something he could in part comprehend—a glowing, flashing jewel that rested in his hand. And slowly there crept into his eyes a look of understanding, while a ghost of a smile twitched and tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The hall, which one instant was a bedlam of roaring voices, went silent as Chet Bullard raised his hand. He was still smiling as he bowed toward the white-haired man whose happy face belied the moisture in his eyes; then he faced the throng, and his voice held no hint of trembling or uncertainty.

"The Columbus of the Stars! I thank you for that title, which I can accept only most humbly. For I ask you to go back with me into history and remember, as I am remembering, that before Columbus there were others whose names are lost.

"The Norsemen—those Vikings of old!—who dared the unknown seas, were first. And again history repeats. But this time the pioneer will not remain unknown. I have been to the Moon; I have reached out into space!—but I followed another's trail.

"Prithjof Haldgren!" he shouted, and extended a hand toward the gentle giant whose face was aflame as he came to Chet's side. "Prithjof Haldgren, I present you to the world. Only one can be the first; and yours is the honor and glory. This medal is yours alone; I place it where it belongs!"

AND Prithjof Haldgren, white of face and lips now instead of fiery red, stood silent and trembling while Chet fastened a jewel upon his grimy tattered blouse; then retired to his chair as if beaten back by the rolling waves of sound.

But to Chet, as he watched the man go, came a quick sense of disappointment. Unconsciously his hand went to the same place on his own chest where had rested an emblem he had prized above all else—and now his searching fingers found only the mark of his disgrace. Then he knew again that the aged President was speaking, while he held Chet beside him with one detaining hand.

"We older ones have served, perhaps; we have done what we could; we pray that the world is better for our efforts! And we shall continue to serve; yet it is to youth that we must look for the progress which is to come.

"Today we face a new life whose horizons, once bounded by the limiting air, have been pushed back. We have conquered space, and before us is the waiting marvel of man's extension of his activities throughout the universe.

"How far shall we go in this new and endless sphere? With interplanetary travel, what is our goal? Only youth can give the answer. And in the hands of youth must the command of this great adventure be placed.

"GENTLEMEN, the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth has created a new command. By the acts of this man who stands beside me, and by his fellow-explorer, Walter Harkness, the Council has been forced to take this step.

"That command will rank second only to the Governing Council itself; a body of men shall compose it who shall be known as the Interstellar Board of Control." He turned squarely toward Chet. "I am placing in your hands, Mr. Bullard, your commission as Commander of that Board. The best minds of all nations will be at your call. Will you accept—will you gather these men about you and do your part in this great work for the greater future of mankind?"

The ears of a listening world waited long for an answer. But the eyes of that world saw a figure whose blond head was suddenly lowered as if to hide a betrayal of what was in his heart; they saw him raise his bowed head to stare mutely toward a girl whose eyes of blue were swimming with happy tears as she gave him a trembling smile—and only then did they see Chet Bullard draw himself erect, while his voice went out with the speed of light to a waiting world.

"I accept, Mr. President. Proudly—humbly—I accept!"

And the eyes of the world, if they were understanding eyes, must have smiled with his, as the Commander of the Interstellar Board of Control grasped, among others, the congratulatory hand of his subordinate, the Commander of Air.

But if there were any who expected to read mockery in those smiling eyes, they had yet to learn the measure of Commander Bullard—"Bullard, of the I. B. C."

ASTOUNDING STORIES

Appears on Newsstands

THE FIRST THURSDAY IN EACH MONTH

For a while it was black backwards, then a shove at the side.

The Einstein See-Saw

By Miles J. Breuer

In their pursuit of an unscrupulous scientist, Phil and Irma are swung into hyperspace — marooned in a realm of strange sights and shapes.

TONY COSTELLO leaned glumly over his neat, glass-topped desk, on which a few papers lay arranged in orderly piles. Tony was very blue and discouraged. The foundations of a pleasant and profitable existence had been cut right out from under him. Gone were the days in which the big racket boss, Scarneck Ed, generously rewarded the exercise of Tony's brilliant talents as an engineer in redesigning cars to give higher speed for bootlegging

purposes, in devising automatic electric apparatus for handling and concealing liquor, in designing beam-directed radios for secret communication among the gangs. Yes, mused Tony, it had been profitable.

Six months ago the Citizens' Committee had stepped in. Now the police department was reorganized; Scarsock Ed Podkowski was in jail, and his corps of trusty lieutenants were either behind the bars with him or scattered far and wide in flight. Tony, always a free spender, had nothing left but the marvelous laboratory and workshop that Scarsock Ed had built him, and his freedom. For the police could find nothing legal against Tony. They had been compelled to let him alone, though they were keeping a close watch on him. Tony's brow was as dark as the mahogany of his desk. He did not know just how to go about making an honest living.

With a hand that seemed limp with discouragement, he reached into his pocket for his cigarette-case. As he drew it out, the lackadaisical fingers failed to hold it firmly enough, and it clattered to the floor behind his chair. With the weary slowness of despondence, he dragged himself to his feet and went behind his chair to pick up the cigarette-case. But, before he bent over it, and while he was looking fully and directly at it, his desk suddenly vanished. One moment it was there, a huge ornament of mahogany and glass; the next moment there was nothing.

TONY suddenly went rigid and stared at the empty space where his desk had stood. He put his hand to his forehead, wondering if his financial troubles were affecting his reason. By that time, another desk stood in the place.

Tony ran over this strange circumstance mentally. His mental processes were active beneath, though dazed on the surface. His desk had stood there. While looking fully at it, all his senses intact, he had seen it vanish, and for a moment there had been nothing in its place. While he stared directly at the empty space from which the desk had disappeared, another desk had materialized there, like a flash. Perhaps, there had been a sort of jar, a tremor, of the floor and of the air, of everything. But the point was that his own desk, at which he had been working one moment, had suddenly vanished, and at the next moment another desk had appeared in its place.

And what a desk! The one that now stood there was smaller than his own palatial one, and shabbier. A raw, unpleasant golden-oak, much scratched and scuffed. Its top was heaped and piled full of books and papers. In the middle of it stood a photograph of a girl, framed in red leather. Irresistibly, the sunny beauty of the face, the bright eyes, the firm little chin, the tall forehead topped by a shining mass of light curly hair, drew Tony's first glance. For a few moments his eyes rested delightedly on the picture.

In a moment, however, Tony noticed that the books and papers on the desk were of a scientific character; and such is the nature of professional interest, that for the time he forgot his astonishment at how the desk had got there, in his absorption in the things heaped on top of it.

Perhaps it isn't fair to give the impression that the desk was in disorder. It was merely busy; just as though someone who had been deeply engaged in working had for the moment stepped away. There was a row of books across the back edge, and Tony leaned over eagerly to glance at the titles.

"'Theory of Parallels,' Lobatchevsky; 'Transformation of Complex Functions,' Riemann; 'Tensors and Geodesics,' Gauss," Tony read. "Hm—old stuff. But here's modern dope along the same line. 'Tensors,' by

Christoffel; 'Absolute Differential Calculus,' by Ricci and Levi Civita. And Schrödinger and Eddington and D'Abro. Looks like somebody's interested in Relativity. Hm!"

HE beat over, his constantly increasing interest showing in the attitude of his body; he turned over papers and opened notebooks crowded full of handwritten figures. Last of all he noted the batch of manuscript directly in front of him in the middle of the front edge of the desk. It was typewritten, with corrections and interlineations all over it in purple ink.

A title, "The Parallel Transformations of Equations for Matter, Energy, and Tensors," had been crossed out with purple ink, and "The Intimate Relation between Matter and Tensors" substituted. Tony beat over it and read. He was so fascinated that it did not even occur to him to speculate on the happy circumstance that the mysteriously appearing desk had brought its own scientific explanation with it. The title of the paper told him that its sheets would elucidate the apparently supernatural phenomenon, and all he did was to plunge breathlessly ahead in his eager reading. The article was short, about seven typewritten sheets. He took out his pencil and followed through the mathematical equations readily. Tony's mind was a brilliant, even though an erring one.

Under the first article lay a second one. One glance at the title caused Tony to stiffen. Then he picked up the typewritten script and carried it across the big room of his laboratory, as far away from the desk as he could get. He put the girl's photograph in his pocket. Then he took heaps and armfuls of papers, books and notes and carried them from the desk to a bench in the far corner. For, as soon as he had read the title, "A Preliminary Report of Experimental Work in the Physical Manipulation of Tesseron," a sudden icy panic gripped his heart lest the desk and its papers suddenly disappear before he had finished reading to the end of the fascinating explanation.

We might add that it did not. For many weeks the desk remained standing in Tony's shop and laboratory, and he had the opportunity to study its contents thoroughly. But it took him only a few hours to grasp its secret, to add his own brilliant conception to it, and to form his great resolve. Once more Tony faced the world hopefully and enthusiastically.

PART II

Vanishing Valuables

THE police understood Tony's share in the exploits of Scarneck Ed thoroughly, and, chagrined at their failure to produce proof that would hold in court, they maintained a close and constant watch on that gifted gentleman long after crime matters in the city seemed to have been cleaned up and forgotten. For one thing, they still had hopes that something would turn up to enable them to round off their work and lock him up with his former pals; for another, they did not fully trust his future behavior. Nevertheless, for three or four months it seemed as though Tony had genuinely reformed. He lived in and for his laboratory and shop. All day the scouts could see him laboring therein, and far into the night he bent over benches and machines under shaded lights. Then, some other astonishing occurrences distracted their attention from Tony to other fields.

One morning Mr. Ambrose Parakeet, private jewel broker, walked briskly out of the elevator on the fourteenth floor of the North American Building and unlocked the door of his office. He flung it open and started in, but stopped as if shot, uttered a queer, hoarse gurgle, and staggered against the door-casing.

In a moment he recovered and began to shout:

"Help! Help! Robbers!"

Before long, several people had gathered. He stood there, gasping, pointing with his hand into the room. The eagerly peering onlookers could see that beside his desk stood an empty crate. It was somewhat old and weatherbeaten and looked as though it might have come from a buffet or a bookcase. He stood there and pointed at it and gasped, and the gathering crowd in the corridor wondered what sort of strange mental malady he had been seized with. The elevator girl, with trained promptness had at once summoned the manager of the building, who elbowed his way through the crowd and stood beside Mr. Parakeet.

"THERE! There! Look! Where is it?" Mr. Parakeet was gasping slowly and gazing round in a circle. He was a little gray man of about sixty, and seemed utterly dazed and overcome.

"What's wrong, Mr. Parakeet?" asked the building manager. "I didn't know you had your safe moved out."

"But, no!" panted the bewildered old man. "I didn't. It's gone. Just gone. Last night at five o'clock I locked the office, and it was there, and everything was straight. What did you do? Who took it?"

The building manager conducted the poor old man into the office, shut the door, and asked the crowd to disperse. He sat Mr. Parakeet down into the most comfortable chair he could find, and then barked snappily into the telephone a few times. Then he sat and stared about him, stopping occasionally to reassure the old man and ask him to be patient until things could be investigated.

The building manager was an efficient man and knew his building and his tenants. He knew, as thoroughly as he knew his own office, that Mr. Parakeet had a medium-sized A. V. & L. Co.'s safe weighing about three tons, that could not be carried up the elevator when Mr. Parakeet had moved in, and had been hoisted into the window with block and tackle. He knew that it was physically impossible for the safe to go down any of the elevators, and knew that none of the operators would dare move any kind of a safe without his permission. Nevertheless, with the aid of a police-sergeant, his night-shift, and the night-watchmen of his building and adjacent ones, it was definitely established that nothing had been moved in or out of the North American Building during the preceding twenty-four hours, either by elevator or through a window to the sidewalk.

THE newspapers took up the mystery with a shout. The prostrating loss suffered by Mr. Parakeet, amounting to over a hundred thousand dollars, added no little sensation to the story. A huge safe, disappearing into thin air, without a trace, and in its place an old wooden crate! What a mouthful for the scareheads! For several days newspapers kept up items about it, dwindling in size and strategic importance of position; for nothing further was ever found. Every bit of investigation, including that by scientific men from the University of Chicago, was futile; not a trace, not a suggestion did it yield.

Six days later the tall scareheads leaped out again: "Another Safe Disappears! Absolutely No Trace! Some time during the night, the six-foot steel safe of the Simonson Loan Company vanished into thin air. In the morning a dilapidated iron oil-cask was found in its place. The safe was so large and heavy that it could not have been moved without a large truck, special hoisting apparatus, a crew of men, and some hours of time. The store was brightly lighted during the entire night, and two watch-

men patrolled it regularly. They report that they saw and heard nothing unusual, and were very much amazed when shown the oil-cask standing where the safe had been the night before." The accounts in the various papers were substantially the same.

Newspaper readers throughout the city and its environs were very much intrigued. Such a thing was very exciting and mystifying; but it was so far out of touch with their own lives that it did not affect them very much at any time except when they were reading the paper or discussing it in conversation. The police were the ones who were doing the real worrying. And, when the following week two more safes disappeared, insurance companies began to take an interest in the matter; and everyone who had any considerable amount of valuables in store began to feel panicky.

THE circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the last of the series, the fourth, were especially amazing. This was also a jewelry safe. Canzoni's is a popular firm that rents a quarter of a floor in a big department store, and does a large volume of moderate-priced business. The receipts are stored in a heavy portable safe in a corner of the silverware section until evening, when they are carried to the large vault of the big store. One Saturday afternoon after a particularly busy day, Mr. Shipley, Canzoni's manager, was watching the hands of the clock creep toward five-thirty. He leaned on a counter and watched the clerks putting away goods for the night; he glanced idly toward the safe which he intended to open in a few minutes. The doormen had already taken their stations to keep out further customers. Then he glanced back at the safe, and it wasn't there!

Mr. Shipley drew a deep breath. The safe disappearances he had read about flashed through his mind. But he didn't believe it. It couldn't be! Yet, there was the empty corner with the birch panels forming the back of the show-windows, and no safe. In a daze, he walked over to the corner, intending to feel about with his hands and make sure the safe was really gone. Before he got there, there flashed into sight in place of the safe, a barrel of dark wood; and in a moment there was a strong odor of vinegar.

Things spun around with Mr. Shipley for a few moments. He grasped a counter and looked wildly about him. Clerks were hurrying with the covering of counters; no one seemed to have noticed anything. He stood a moment, gritted his teeth, and breathed deeply, and soon was master of himself. He stood and waited until the last customer was gone, and then called several clerks and pointed to where the safe had stood.

Within the space of a month, thirteen safes and three million dollars worth of money or property had disappeared. The police were dazed and desperate, and business was in a panic. Scientific men were appealed to, to help solve the riddle, but were helpless. Many of them agreed that though in theory such things were explainable, science was as yet far from any known means of bringing them about in actuality. Insurance companies spent fabulous sums on investigation, and, failing to get results, raised their premiums to impossible levels.

PART III

The Lady of the Picture

PHIL HURREN, often known as "Zip" Hurren, reporter on the *Examiner*, felt, on the day the managing editor called him into the sanctum, that fortune could smile on him no more brightly. There wasn't anything brighter.

"You stand well with the detective bureau," his boss had said; "and

you've followed this safe-disappearing stuff pretty closely. You're relieved of everything else for the time being. Get on that business, and see that the public hears from the *Examiner!*"

Phil knew better than to say any more, for before he recovered from his surprise, the editor had turned his back, buried himself in his work on the desk, and forgotten that Phil was there. Nor did Phil waste any real time in rejoicing. That is why he was called "Zip." When things happened, whether it was luck or system, Phil was usually there. In sixty seconds more, Phil was in a taxicab, whirling toward police headquarters.

Luck or system, he didn't know, but he struck it again. The big wagon was just starting away from the station door when he arrived, crowded inside with bluecoats and plainclothes-men. The burly, red-faced man with chevrons on his sleeve, sitting beside the driver, saw Phil jump out, and motioned with his hand. Phil leaped up on the back step of the vehicle and hung on for dear life with his fingers through the wire grating as they careened through the streets. The men on the inside grinned at him; a number of them knew him and liked him. Gradually the door was opened and he crowded in. He found Sergeant Johnson and eyed him routely.

"How the hell do you find these things out, I'd like to know," the sergeant exclaimed. "Are you a mind-reader?"

"I don't really know anything," Phil admitted with that humility which the police like on the part of newspaper men and seldom meet with. "Do you mind?"

"No objection," granted the sergeant. "Been watching all the old crooks since these safes have been popping. Nothin' much on any of them, except this slippery wop, Tony Costello. No, we haven't caught him at anything. Seems to be keeping close and minding his own business. Working in his laboratory. Ought to make a good living if he turned honest; clever guy, he seems. But he's been too prosperous lately. Lots of machinery delivered to his place; we traced it to the manufacturers and find it cost thousands. Big deposits in his banks. But, no trace of his having sold anything or worked at anything outside his own place. So, we're running over to surprise him and help him get the cobwebs out of his closets."

THE raid on Tony Costello's shop and laboratory disclosed nothing whatever. They surrounded the place effectively and surprised Tony genuinely. But a thorough search of every nook and cranny revealed nothing whatever of a suspicious nature. There was merely a tremendous amount of apparatus and machinery that none of the raiding party understood anything about. Tony's person was also thoroughly searched, and the leather-framed photograph of the beautiful unknown girl was found.

"Who's this?" the sergeant demanded. "She don't look like anyone that might belong to your crowd."

"I don't know," Tony replied.

"What'ya mean, don't know?" The sergeant gave him a rough shake. "What'ya carryin' it for, then?"

"I had really forgotten that it was in my pocket," Tony replied calmly, at his ease. "I found it in a hotel room one day, and liked the looks of it."

"I know you're lying there," the sergeant said, "though I'm ready to believe that you don't know her. Too high up for you. Well, it looks suspicious, and we'll take the picture."

"Boy!" gasped Phil. "What a girl she must be in person! Even the picture would stand out among a thousand. May I have the picture, Sergeant?"

"You can come and get a copy of it to-morrow. We'll have it copied and see if we can trace the subject of it. That might tell us something."

THE following morning Phil was at Police Headquarters to pick up further information, and to get a copy of the girl's photograph. Like the police, he could not keep his mind off the idea that there was some association between the crooked engineer and the disappearance of the safes. It seemed to fit too well. The scientific nature of the phenomena, Tony Costello's well known reputation for scientific brilliance, and his recent affluence; what else could it mean? In some way, Tony was getting at these safes. But how? And how prove it? Most exhaustive searches failed to reveal any traces of the safes anywhere. If any fragment of one of them had appeared in New York or San Francisco, the news would have come at once, such was the sensation all over the country that the series of disappearances had caused. Tony's calm insolence during the raid, his attitude of waiting patiently till the police should have had their fun and have it over with so that he might be left at peace again, showed that he must be guilty, for anyone else would have protested and felt deeply injured and insulted. He seemed to be enjoying their discomfiture, and absolutely confident of his own safety.

"There's got to be some way of getting him," Phil mused; and he mused almost absent-mindedly, for he was gazing at the photograph of the girl. For many minutes he looked at it, and then put it silently into his pocket.

Five o'clock in the evening of that same day came the news of another safe disappearance. Phil got his tip over the phone, and in fifteen minutes was at the scene. It was too much like the others to go into detail about; a six-foot portable safe had suddenly disappeared right in front of the eyes of the office staff of The Epicure, a huge restaurant and cafeteria that fed five thousand people three times a day. In its place stood a ragged, rusty old Ford coupe body. He went away from there, shaking his head.

Then suddenly in the midst of his dinner, he jumped up and ran. An idea had leaped into his head.

"Right after one of these things pops is the time to take a peek at Tony," he said to himself, and immediately he was on the way.

BUT how to get his peep was not so easy a problem. When he alighted from his cab a block away from Tony's building, he was hesitant about approaching it. Tony knew him, and might see him first. Phil circled the brick building, keeping under cover or far enough away; all around it was a belt of thirty feet of lawn between the building and the sidewalk. Ought he have called the police and given them his idea? Or should he wait till darkness and see what he could do alone?

Then suddenly he saw her. Across the street, standing in the shelter of a delivery truck in front of an apartment, she was observing Tony's building intently. The aristocratic chin, the brightness of the eyes, the waves of her hair, and the general sunny expression! It could not be anyone else. Post haste he ran across the street.

"Pardon me!" he cried excitedly, lifting his hat and then digging hastily into his inner pocket. "I'm sure you must be the—"

"Well, the nerve!" the young woman said icily, and pointing her chin at the opposite horizon she walked haughtily away.

By that time Phil had dug out his picture and was running after her.

"Please," he said, "just a moment!" And he held the picture out in front of her face.

"Now, where in the world—?" She looked at him in puzzled and indignant inquiry, and then burst out laughing.

"It *is* you, isn't it?" Phil asked. "What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, you looked so abject. I'm sure your intentions must be good. Now tell me where you got my picture."

"Let us walk this way," suggested Phil, leading away from Tony's building.

AND, as they walked, he told her the story. When he got through she stood and looked at him a long time in silence.

"You look square to me," she said. "You're working on my side already. Will you help me."

"I'll do anything—anything—" Phil said, and couldn't think of any other way of expressing his willingness, for the wonderful eyes bore radiantly upon him.

"First I must tell you my story," she began. "But before I can do so, you must promise me that it is to remain an absolute secret. You're a newspaper man—"

Phil gave his promise readily.

"My father is Professor Bloomsbury at the University of Chicago. He has been experimenting in mathematical physics, and I have been assisting him. He has succeeded in proving experimentally the concept of tensors. A tensor is a mathematical expression for the fact that space is smooth and flat, in three dimensions, only at an infinite distance from matter; in the neighborhood of a particle of matter, there is a pucker or a wrinkle in space. My father has found that by suddenly removing a portion of matter from out of space, the pucker flattens out. If the matter is heavy enough and its removal sudden enough, there is a violent disturbance of space. By planning all the steps carefully my father has succeeded in swinging a section of space on a pivot through an angle of 180 degrees, and causing two portions of space to change places through hyperspace, or as you might express it popularly, through the fourth dimension."

PHIL held his hands to his head.

"It is not difficult," she went on smiling. "Loan me your pocket knife and a piece of paper from your notebook. If I cut out a rectangular piece of paper from this sheet and mount it on a pivot or shaft at A B, I can rotate it through 180 degrees, just like a child's teeter-totter, so that X will be where Y originally was. That is in two dimensions. Now, simply add one dimension all the way round and you will have what daddy is doing with space. He does it by shoving fifty or a hundred pounds of lead right out of space; the sudden flattening out of the tensors causes a section of space to flop around, and two portions of space change places. The first time he tried it, his desk disappeared, and we've never seen it again. We've thought it was somewhere out in hyperspace; but this terrible story of yours about disappearing safes, and the fact that you have this picture, means that someone has got the desk."

"Surely you must have suspected that long ago, when the disappearances first began?" Phil suggested.

"I've just returned from Europe," said Miss Bloomsbury. "I was tremendously puzzled when I got my first newspapers in New York and read about the safes. Gradually I gathered all the news on the subject, and it seemed most reasonable to suspect this gangster engineer."

"Great minds and same channels," Phil smiled. "But your father. Why didn't he speak up when the safes began to pop?"

"Ha! ha!" she laughed a tinkly little laugh. "My father doesn't know what safes are for, nor who is Presi-

dent, nor that there has been a war. Mother and I take care of him, and he works on tensors. He has probably never heard about the safes."

"WHAT were you going to do around here?" Phil asked, marveling at the courage of the girl who had come to look the situation over personally.

"I hadn't formed any definite plans. I just wanted to look about first."

"Well," said Phil, "as you will soon see by the papers, another safe has puffed out. It occurred to me that we might find out something by spying about here immediately after one of the disappearances. That's why I'm here. If you'll tell me where you live, or wait for me at some safe place, I'll come and report to you as soon as I find out anything."

"Oho! So that's the kind of a girl you think I am!" She laughed musically again. "No, Mr. Reporter. Either we reconnoiter together, or each on our own."

"Oh, together, by all means," said Phil so earnestly that she laughed again. "And since we'd better wait for darkness, let's have something to eat somewhere. I didn't finish my dinner."

Phil found Ione Bloomsbury in person to be even more wonderful than her photograph suggested. Obviously she had brains; it was apparent, too, that she had breeding. Her cheerful view of the world was like a tonic for tired nerves; and, withal, she had a gentle sort of courtesy in her manner that may have been old-fashioned, but it was almost too much for Phil. Before the dinner was over, he would have laid his heart at her feet. It gave him a thrill that went to his head, to have her by his side, slipping along through the darkness toward Tony's building.

This building was a one-story brick affair with a vast amount of window space. From the sidewalk they could see faint lights glowing within, but could make out no further details. They therefore selected the darkest side of the building, and made their way hurriedly across the lawn. Here, they found, they could see the crowding apparatus within the one long room fairly well. They looked into one window after another, making a circuit around the building, until Phil suddenly clutched the girl's arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "Straight ahead and a little to the left!"

At the place he indicated stood a tall safe. Across the top of its door were painted in gold letters, the words: "The Epicure."

"That's the safe that went tonight," whispered Phil. "That's all we need to know. Now, quick to a telephone!"

"Oh," said a gentle, ironic voice behind them, "not so quick!"

THEY whirled around and found themselves looking into two automatic pistols, and behind them in the light of the street lamps, the sardonic smile of Tony Costello.

"Charmed at your kind interest in my playthings, I'm sure," he purred. "Only it leaves me in an embarrassing position. I'm not exactly sure what to do about it. Kindly step inside while I think."

Phil made a move sidewise along the wall.

"Stop!" barked Costello sharply. "Of course," his voice was quiet again, "that might be the simplest way out. I think I am within my legal rights if I shoot people who are trying to break into my property. Yet, that would be messy—not neat. Better step in. The window swings outward."

At the point of his pistols they clambered through the window, and he came in after them. He kept on talking, as though to himself, but loud enough for them to hear.

"Yes, we must some way get that

is nearer than that. Hm! Violence distresses me. Never liked Ed's rough methods. Yet, this *is* embarrassing."

He turned to them.

"What did you really want here? I see that you are the *Examiner's* reporter, and that you are the lady of the photograph. What did you come here for? Ah, yes, the safe. Well, go over and look at it."

As they hesitated, he stamped his foot and shrilled crankily:

"I mean it! Go, look at the safe! Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yes," said Phil coolly, his self-control returning, "where are the other safes?"

"Oh. Anything to oblige. Last requests are a sort of point of honor, aren't they. Ought to grant them. Stand close to that safe!"

HE backed away, his guns levelled at them. He laid down the right one, keeping the left one aimed, and moved some knobs on a dial and threw over a big switch. A muffled rumbling and whirring began somewhere; and then, slowly, a block of tables and apparatus ten feet square rose upward toward the ceiling. A section of the floor on which they stood came up, supported by columns, and now formed the roof of a room that had risen out of the flood. In it were four safes.

"Poor old Ed!" sighed Tony. "There was a time when he had a lot of good stuff put away down there. I've got six rooms like that. Well, the good old times are over."

He threw out the switch and the whole mass sank slowly and silently downward till the floor was level and there was no further sign of it. Then he backed away to another table, across the room from them, keeping his gun levelled.

"Too bad," he said. "I don't like to do these things. But—" he sighed deeply, "self-preservation. Now I'm going to flip you out, yes, out, into a strange region. I've never been there. I don't know if there is food or drink there. I hope so, for you'll never get back here."

Phil stiffened. He determined to leap and risk a shot. But he was too late. Tony's hand came down on a switch. There was a sudden, nauseating jar. The laboratory vanished.

There was only the safe, Isaac Bloomsbury and himself, and a small circle of concrete floor extending to a dim little horizon a dozen feet away. Beyond that, nothing. Not blue, as the sky is. Not black, as dark, empty spaces are. It suggested black, because there was no impression of light or color on the eyes; but it wasn't black. It was nothingness.

PART IV

Marooned in Hyperspace

"I SUPPOSE you realize what he has done?" Miss Bloomsbury inquired.

"Couldn't be too sure, but it looks like plenty. What's the equation for it?" Beneath his jocularity, Phil felt a tremendous sinking within him. It looked serious, despite the fact that he did not understand it at all.

"He has swung us out into hyperspace, or into the fourth dimension, as your newspaper readers might understand it, and has let us hang there. Remember our slip of paper. Suppose X and Y were swung out of the plane of the paper and allowed to remain at an angle with it. We are at an angle with space, out in hyperspace."

There was a period of bewilderment, almost panic, in which they both felt so physically weak that they had to sit down on the concrete and stare at each other mutely. But this passed and their natural courage soon reasserted itself. Their first thought was to take stock of what information they could get on their situation, and their first step was to ver-

ture as close as possible to the queer little horizon which lay almost at their very feet. It gave them a frightened feeling, as though they were stabding high up on a precipice or tower.

To their surprise, the horizon receded as they walked toward it, always remaining about a dozen feet away from them. At first they walked on concrete and then came to a crumbly edge of it and found themselves stepping on hard, sandy earth. Later there was rock, sometimes granite-like, sometimes black and shiny. But what they saw underfoot was nothing, compared with the glimpses of things they got out in the surrounding emptiness. First there was a vast space in which a soft light shone, and in which there were countless spheres of various sizes, motionlessly suspended. The spheres seemed to be made of wood, a green, sap-filled, unseasoned wood. The scene was visible for a few seconds, and vanished suddenly as they walked on. This astonished them; so they stepped back a pace or two and saw it again; and as they moved on, it disappeared again.

THEN there was a great stretch of water in which the backs of huge monsters rolled and from which a hot wind blew for a few instants until they passed on and the scene vanished. There was a short walk with nothing but emptiness, and then there appeared huge, oblique, cubistic looking rows of jagged rocks in wild, dizzy formations that didn't look possible; and farther on, after another interval of emptiness, a tangle of brown, ropey vines with black-green leaves on them, an immense space filled with serpentine swinging loops and lengths of innumerable vines. Several loops projected so near them that they could have reached out and touched them had they wished.

"This is too much for me!" Phil gasped. "Have we gone crazy? Or did he kill us, and is this Purgatory?"

Ione smiled and shook her little head in which she had a goodly store of modern mathematics stored away.

"These must be glimpses of other 'spaces' besides our own space. If we could see in four dimensions we could see them all spread out before us. But we can only perceive in three dimensions; therefore, as we walk through hyperspace past the different 'spaces' which are ranged about in it, we get a glimpse into such of them as are parallel with our own space. Can you understand that?"

"Oh, yes," groaned Phil. "It sounds just about like it looks. But, don't mind me. Go on, have your fun."

"I've been thinking about those wooden spheres," continued Ione. "I'm sure they must be sections of trees that are cut crosswise by our 'space;' they grow in three dimensions, but only two of them are our dimensions and a third is strange to us. We see only three-dimensional sections of them, which are spheres. There is more of them, that we cannot see, in another dimension."

"Yes, yes. Just as plain as the Jabberwock!"

"Look! There's a real Jabberwock!" exclaimed Ione.

On ahead of them they saw a number of creatures that seemed to be made of painted wooden balls in different colors, joined together.

"Tinkertoys!" exclaimed Phil. "Live ones! Big ones!"

The animals, though they looked for all the world as though they were made of painted wood, moved with jerky motions and clattered and snarled.

"There is probably more to *them* in another dimension," Ione said.

SUDDENLY one of the beasts approached them with a leap. There were two big eyes and two

rows of teeth that came together with a snap, right on Phil's trouser-leg. He jerked himself away, sacrificing some square inches of trouser-leg, and, whirling around, kicked at the thing with all his force. It almost paralyzed his foot, for the animal seemed to be made of wood or bone. But it disappeared, and, as it did, both of them felt a queer, nauseating jolt. A few more minutes' walk brought them back to the safe without seeing any more spaces; and the sight of its black iron bulk filled them with a home-like relief, which in a moment they recognized as a mockery.

"Are we on a sphere of some sort?" Phil asked.

"Probably on an irregular mass of matter," Ione replied, "part of which is Tony's concrete floor, and part of which comes out of some other dimension. This mass of matter is at one end of a long, bar-like portion of space, the middle of which is pivoted in our world, somewhere in Chicago, and both ends of which are free in hyperspace."

"Then," suggested Phil, "why can't we walk down to the axle on which it is balanced, and step out into Chicago?"

"Because there isn't any *matter* for us to walk on. We are not able to move about in space, in three dimensions, you know. We can only get around in two dimensions, on the surface of *matter*."

"Well, let's try another exploration trip at right angles to our first one. After all, these 'spaces' are an interesting show, and I want to see some more."

They started out in the selected direction, and after a short walk got a glimpse of a vast space dotted with stars and nebulae, with two bright moons sailing overhead. A few steps farther on was a wall of solid granite, near enough to touch with their hands. Again, there was an intensely active mass of weaving bright stripes and loops and circles, seeming to consist of light only, and making them dizzy in a few seconds. Ione wondered if it might not be something like an organic molecule on a large scale. Again, odd, queer, indescribable shapes and outlines would appear and disappear, obviously three-dimensional sections of multi-dimensional things, cut by space. Once they passed a place of intense cold and terrific noise and escaped destruction or lunacy only because it took them the merest instant to get past.

They arrived back at the safe, very much fatigued from the strain, their minds woefully confused. Hunger and thirst were beginning to thrust up their little reminders; and for the first time the terrors of their position, flung out into hyperspace on a small, barren piece of matter, began to seem real.

AFTER a rest they started out again. As Phil had touched, in kicking it, a creature from another "space," perhaps they might find water and even food somewhere. They retraced their first steps to the spot where they had at first seen water. They found it again and were able to dip their hands into it. It was warm, and too salty to drink. They came to the place with the creepers or vines, and Phil reached out and seized one of them. It was heavy, rubbery, and elastic, stretching readily as he pulled it.

"These little lurches that we feel must be the snapping back of the space-puckers as expressed by tensors," Ione remarked. "Every time matter goes in or out of space, the nature of space is altered."

"Well," observed Phil, releasing the vine, "I'd better be careful. If one of these things hauls me off here, our last bond with home is gone. I don't want to get lost in some other space."

As he released the vines they

snapped back to their places, and the forest of them dimmed a little and reappeared.

They made the round again, dodging cautiously past the point where they had previously found the "Tinkertoy" animals, and succeeded in getting past their snapping teeth. But no promise of food or water did they find anywhere.

"Looks like we're sunk," observed Phil, as they dropped down on the concrete to rest, leaning their backs against the safe.

How *time* counted in hyperspace, neither Phil nor Ione could tell; Phil knew that his watch was running. He knew that it was ages and ages that he sat with his back against the safe, reviewing all the events of his past life, and thinking of this ignominious end to a lively career! He swore half aloud; then suddenly looked at Ione, ready to apologize. He found her weeping silently.

"I should never have let you come into the building with me," he stammered in confusion at her tears.

"Oh, what do I care what becomes of *me!*" she exclaimed angrily. "But who will take care of poor daddy? He doesn't even know when it's time to eat." And she burst into a fresh fit of weeping.

Phil beat his head in the dumbness of profound despair.

PART V

The Reversible Equation

DESPAIR, however, is a luxury. Necessity is a stimulus. With the parchings of thirst and the gnawings of hunger, the two young people ceased swearing and weeping. Phil got up and paced about and sat down again. Ione's tears stopped and dried, and she sat and thought.

In the back of her mind there had been forming a vague sort of an idea, which had signalled ahead of itself that there was hope. She sat there and desperately drove her reason to its utmost efforts, to find that idea and bring it to the surface of consciousness. Hand to hand fights with wild animals, battles between ships of the line, vicious duels between ace-aviators in the clouds are tense fights; but they cannot compare in anxious difficulty with the struggle to bring up an unformed idea out of the subconscious mind—especially when one knows that the idea is there, and that it must be found to save one's life.

"Ione!" exclaimed Phil. It was the first time he had used the name. "What is the matter? You are as tense as a—"

"Ah!" cried Ione, springing up. "Tense! Tensors! I have it!"

Phil gazed at her in alarm. She laughed; at first it was a strained laugh, but gradually it melted into her sunny one.

"No, I'm not crazy. I knew there was a way out, and I've been trying to reason it out. How simple. You remember the little jolts when you pulled at the vines and when you kicked the funny animal? Tensors. Matter and space are so closely interrelated that you can't move matter in or out of space without causing disturbance, recoils, and tremors in space. Those bits of matter were small, and produced only a slight disturbance. It takes about a hundred pounds of lead to swing this segment—"

"Oho! Got you!" exclaimed Phil. "Not so dumb! The safe!"

"Yes. The safe!" Ione cried.

"Throw it off and watch us swing, eh? What would happen?"

"I might calculate it if I knew the weight of the safe."

"No calculating when I'm around," Phil said. "It couldn't make things any worse. Try it first and calculate afterwards."

THEY got behind the safe and pushed, and their combined strength against it was about as ef-

fective as it would have been in moving the Peoples' Gas Building. They sat down again in despair.

"Suppose we *could* budge it," Lone said. "All we could do would be to push it around this piece of matter we are on. That wouldn't help. We've got to get it out of space. We can't push it hard enough to do that. It's got to be shot out suddenly—"

"And we haven't got a gun handy," Phil remarked droopingly.

"Not exactly a gun. A sort of sling—"

Phil leaped to his feet.

"A sling. Why! To be sure! The vines!"

Without another word, both of them got up and ran. They hastened in a direction opposite to the one they had at first taken on their trip of exploration, and this brought them first past the "space" of the Tinkertoy-like animals. As they went by, several of these beasts darted at them, one of them snapping at Lone's heels. She uttered a scream, causing Phil to turn about and kick right and left among them. He drove them back and escaped from them, rejoining Lone.

"Wait," he said, when they reached the vines. "Remember those wooden balls. If I could get a few to throw at those critters—"

In a moment they were off, and finally arrived at the point from which they first saw the balls. Odd it seemed, how they hung suspended in space, thousands of them, all sizes. Phil reached out and grasped one about the size of a baseball and drew it toward himself. He felt a dizzy lurch and heard Lone scream.

"Let go!" she screamed again.

When he suddenly realized what was going on, he found himself prostrate on the ground, with Lone across him, her arms about his knees.

"Do you realize," she panted, disentangling herself, "that you were pulling yourself out of this space into that one?"

"Thanks!" said Phil. "Never say die. More careful this time, and a smaller one."

HE reached out and grasped a ball smaller than a golf-ball, and pulled carefully, keeping an eye upon Lone. There was resistance to his pull, but gradually the ball came. It seemed heavy. There was a crack as of breaking wood, and he fell backward, with a wave of sweetness sweeping strongly over him. He gazed in amazement at a heavy wooden stick that he held in his hands. The only thing about it that suggested the ball for which he had reached was its diameter.

"Can't understood it, but appreciate it just the same," he said. He broke the stick in two, and had two excellent clubs.

"Simple," Lone replied. "The balls are cross-sections of these trees or sticks which grow in a 'space' at right angles to our own; and we only see their three-dimensional cross-sections."

"Yes," said Phil. "Cabbages and kings. I'm for you and the party."

A short walk brought them to the "space" of the vines. After testing the matter out carefully, they found that they could each pull two of them at a time. The vines stretched amazingly when they found those whose far ends were fixed firmly in the tangle, permitting them to carry their own ends along with them toward the safe. Phil wound his vines around his left arm and stuck one club through his belt. The other he got ready for the wooden animals.

He needed it. The size of the pack was doubled, and he rapped them till his hand was numb before he and Lone got by. Their vines drew out thin, but held until they were firmly tied about the safe. They went back after four more.

"I should judge," said Phil, "that by the time we get thirty or forty, the elastic pull will be strong enough

to drag the safe back with them as they crap back home."

TRIP after trip they made, fighting the wooden animals with their clubs each time. Their clothes were torn, and their legs bleeding; their throats were dry and lips cracked. The hard animals seemed to have a persistent, mechanical ferocity that was undiscouraged by hammering with the clubs and by repeated repulses. Phil could not seem to hurt them; he merely knocked them away. Finally, on the ninth trip, Ione collapsed when she reached the safe. As she fell, the elasticity of the vines began slowly to drag her back with them. Phil was forced to sit across her knees while he tied his own vines about the safe. Then he released her and added her vines to the great cable about the safe.

An overbold hard animal rattled up and snapped at her. Goaded to fury, Phil swung at it with his club and hurled it through the air. He could feel the lurch as it left his space and entered another. Then he pushed with his mightiest effort against the safe. It budged, and slid a few inches. He used his stick as a lever. It moved again, a little faster. Ione struggled to her feet and tried to help, but her efforts were ineffectual.

With one arm about her, Phil pried again under the safe, knowing that another trip after vines was out of question. Another animal snapped at their heels. For a while, it was kick backwards, then a shove at the safe. Each time the safe moved. The sight of its movement revived Ione, so that she was able to push also. Gradually it acquired a steady motion, pulled by the contraction of the vines; its progress soon became faster and faster. Phil was about to follow it and give it another push, when Ione drew him back.

Suddenly they experienced a sinking sensation and a fearful vertigo. The snapping animals faded. Ahead of them was the forest of vines, and they saw the safe hurled into it, crashing, plunging into the tangled mass. The whole view crumpled and moved upwards like a swirl of leaves in a wind, and then vanished with a snap.

THEY were sick and dizzy, but tremendously curious to see everything. The water, the cubistic cliffs, the vast space full of balls, all curiously blurred, appeared in succession. There were blank spaces and then blurred sights of things which they did not recognize, never having seen them before. Then the dizziness and the nausea abated, and ahead of them was a vast yellow blaze, a huge nebula, and in it were double-colored suns and ringed planets with swarms of moons; this glorious sight remained for many seconds, as they gazed at it in panting astonishment, half reclining on the concrete; and then it faded. Again the nausea came on; again the succession of blurred views. Eventually the myriad spheres, the water with the leviathans, the forest of vines, each succeeding scene grew more blurred. Their nausea was correspondingly increased, till they were forced to lie down on the ground from illness.

When their giddiness abated, there were blurring views again. There was an impression as though the speed of a train were decreasing as one looks out of the window. And now one view held for several seconds, a vast and wild mountain-range with glaciers and snow peaks by moonlight. When this faded gradually, the scenes began to flick by, more and more rapidly, and grew blurred. Phil and Ione were attacked by nausea until, again, they had to lie down. After that came the familiar succession: the wooden animals, the tangle of vines, the vast sea, the spheres, and more blurred scenes. Then came

a pause, with the nebula and the glorious suns swinging into view once again.

"Oh, I understand!" Ione exclaimed. "We're swinging. The safe was so heavy that we swung too violently, too far, and back again—"

"And we keep going till it knocks us out, or till the old cat dies," added Phil.

HOWEVER, they found that after a number of repetitions of the same program, their giddiness was becoming less; and instead of lying down in the middle of the swing, they could look about. Then it occurred to Phil to time the interval between the nebula and the mountain-range. When the exact halfway point was determined, and after several more swings, they could see dimly the windows and machinery of Tony's laboratory flash by when they passed the middle.

"I don't mean to be a crepe-hanger, but how do you know we will stop at the right point?" Phil asked.

"I don't," replied Ione cheerfully. "But mathematics says so. A freely oscillating segment of space would naturally come to equilibrium in a position parallel to the rest of its own space, would it not?"

There came a swing when they did not reach the nebula on the one hand and the mountain-range on the other. After that, views dropped off from either end of the swing quite rapidly, and before many minutes, they looked into Tony's laboratory a large portion of the time. For many seconds the laboratory held; then it would gradually fade, and reappear again, only to fade into empty nothingness all around.

"The old cat's dead," Phil finally announced.

They sat and stared about them as the laboratory held steady and no further intervening periods of blackness intervened. They both sighed deeply and slumped over on the ground to rest.

"Beep! beep! beep!"

SOME sort of hammering woke them up. They looked about them in a daze. It was broad daylight, and things looked queer in the laboratory. There was a smell of scorched rubber and hot oil. Great loops of wire sagged down from above. Several nondescript heaps stood about that might once have been machinery, but now suggested melting snow-men, all fused into heaps. At a table sprawled a queer, misshapen figure that suggested human origin. Both of its hands were burned to cinders to the elbows. Great holes were scorched into the clothes. But the face was recognizable. Tony's playthings had got him at last.

"Looks like something's happened in here!" Phil gasped, in amazement.

"I'll bet it has, too," Ione exclaimed. "This is the first time it occurred to me that our recoil from throwing the safe overboard and the oscillation of our space-segment must have created a tremendous electrical field in the tetra-ordinate apparatus. The reaction is reversible, you see. The field swings the space-segment, or the swinging of the space-segment creates the field. And the field was too much for Tony."

At this point the door fell under the blows of the police, and the raiding squad rushed into the room.

Have You Tried

STRANGE TALES?

Wandl, the Invader

Part Three of a Four-Part Novel

By Ray Cummings

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

MENACE from the stars! An inhabited invading planet had come from interplanetary space, and hovered between Mars and Jupiter.

Tumultuous days for me, Gregg Haljan! And for all those whom I loved best. My fiancé, Anita Prince, and Venza, the Venus girl who was to marry Snap Dean, and Snap himself — all of them. I was sure, had been captured by beings from this new weird planet. Captured and taken into space in a strange projectile.

The enemy was in league with criminals upon Earth, Venus and Mars. Set Molo and his sister Meka had captured Venza and Anita, and possibly Snap. I had glimpsed two of the new beings: a gruesome master brain, large and naked, with a tiny withered body; and a great ten-foot hooded shape—its slave.

Upon Earth, Venus and Mars, three strange beams of light had been planted. They stood like crossing swords in the sky, turning with their planets. The publics of our three babbling worlds were in panic.

"What do the beams mean?"

The question rang through all three worlds. Nor could I guess, when, that morning at dawn, I left Earth as navigator of the Comstare with my friend Johnny Greatline, who commanded its fifty men and space armament. We did not know what anything meant, save that the Invading Planet was planning to attack Earth, Venus and Mars all at

Stronger grows Wandl's deadly grip on Earth, even as Gregg and his friends are caught in the invading planet's weird night.

ence; and that now, out by our moon, an enemy ship was lurking.

I flung the *Comets* toward the moon. We saw the enemy's weird vessel plunging at us. At tremendous velocities the *Comets* and enemy vessel flashed past each other, horribly close—within range of our guns. We fired. The strangely fashioned ship reddened from the impact, but was unharmed.

It did not fire at us, but was gone in a few seconds into distance beyond sight of the naked eye, leaving behind a cloud of little whirling disks which it had discharged. Flat, ten-foot metal things, they were, and they came straight toward us. There was no way of avoiding them. Greatline shot and annihilated all he could, but the rest struck our pressure dome and ripped it. Our precious interior air began rushing out. The bulkheads began breaking.

I rang the warning siren.

"Take to the pressure suits! Prepare to abandon ship!"

Greatline and I were the last left alive on board. We leaped together. Alone in space, with air-pressure suits and helmets, we did not fall, but floated, held in space by the gravity pull of the wreck of the *Comets*.

Then the enemy vessel came back. A beam from its bow carried repulsive gravity. It trained that beam

His flabby little arm touched the image ball; gave it light and color.

upon the broken *Cometara*, and the wreck and all its survivors were forced down—falling upon the moon. I was separated from Grantline. But I freed myself from the wreckage, and, as I floated in space, a disk like a little tender came from the enemy. Glued by gravity to its side, I was taken back to the enemy ship.

For hours I lay aloud in the darkness of the pressure chamber. A strange existence there! No gravity! I weighed only a few pounds, so that with the least movement I bounced like a toy balloon!

I heard voices in a neighboring room. Molo, the Martian criminal, was there. Anita and Venra also; they had been captured by him, but were as yet uninjured. And Snap too was somewhere on board.

I found that we were being taken to Wandl—were already in its atmosphere. And the menace, which Wandl, the Invader, was bringing against Earth, Venus and Mars was then explained. I learned the meaning of those light beams turning and crossing in the sky!

The electronic beam planted in Great-New York could not be destroyed. With each rotation of the Earth it was sweeping the sky—and Wandl, from a great control station, was flinging attractive gravity upon that beam, using it as a monstrous lever to stop the rotation of the Earth! With every daily passage now the force was being exerted. Earth's rotation was slowing, and in a few days it would stop, with the end of the beam drawn to Wandl and held there. The same with the beams from Mars and Venus.

Three giant gravitational chains! Wandl would withdraw from our Solar System, and the titanic tow-ropes would pull Earth, Venus and Mars after it!

It meant the destruction, not of our worlds, but of all life upon them!

It meant our sun dwindling as the worlds were towed outward. Warmth gone. Coldness like that of interstellar space destroying every living organism. Three dead worlds.

Wandl would draw them to her own sun, then free them. Send them with new orbits around that distant blazing star. Three new worlds brought home triumphantly by Wandl to join the little family of inhabited planets revolving around this other sun. Three fair and lovely worlds, warmed back by the other sunlight to be green mansions untenanted, ready to receive the new beings who would come and possess them!

CHAPTER XIII

Wandl, the Weird

"YOU, Snap!"

"Gregg! But how—"

"Hush! They might hear us."

"They can do more than that. They can almost hear you think."

"Anita and Venra are here."

"I know it. I was with them for a time. This accursed gravity! I can't walk."

"Careful," I whispered. "You can crack your head on something—the least false step. Are they taking us ashore?"

"I guess so. How did you happen—"

"Tell you later."

They had come for me in that dark pressure-ports; taken me without a word along a dim metal corridor of the ship which evidently had landed a few moments before. Then Snap, with strange figures around him, had been flung at me.

These weird beings! The brains were here, but not many. I saw half a dozen on the ship. They could move easily now. They bounced upon their small arms and legs, hitching with little leaps of a few feet. Close at hand they were gruesome; from a distance they had the aspect of thirty-inch ovoids, bouncing of their

own volition. And I saw too that under and towards the back was a shriveled body.

And the other figures were wholly different. They seemed at first ten-foot, upright insects! The two legs were like stilts; the body narrow, but with bulging chest; the neck thin, holding the small round head—a head about the size of my own.

SUCH futile words to picture this thing which was a man of Wandl! There was no skin, but instead what seemed to be a glossy, hard brown shell. It was laid in scales; and upon the legs was a brown fuzz of stiff hair. There were many joints, both of the legs, and the torso. Clothing was worn which might have been the fabric of a thick membrane—comparable to the hide of some strange animal.

Still I fail of an adequate picture of these, my captors. The fundamentals of human form, yet so much more like gigantic insects! The clothing—a single garment hanging from a wide belt, half-way down the legs—seemed incongruous, fantastically aping humanity.

This was the worker, equipped by nature for mechanical tasks. There were not two arms, but at least ten. From what could have been called the shoulders, they were tentacles, half the length of an elephant's trunk, with many-fingered hands at the ends. From the waist depended huge, lobster-like pincers; and from the chest and back the arms were smaller, each with a different type of finger-claw.

The head and face were most of all a personal mocking of mankind. Wide, upstanding, listening ears were upon the sides of the head; one on the forehead and one in the back. The face was mobile, with tiny brown scales small as a fish. A nose orifice, with two protruding brown eyes above it, set outward on stems, and an up-ended slit of mouth. And there was an eye in the back of the head.

A gruesome robot, this insect-like worker! Yet they were not robots, but human, as myself. Men, bred for mechanical tasks.*

OF necessity I have been forced into digression. Soap and I clung together, whispering, as a group of workers pushed us down a descending incline. Soap, back there in Great-New York when Molo's contact light had burst into existence, had fallen, half unconscious. He was aware of receding forms; one stumbled over him. They picked him up, carried him away with them. It was Molo's idea to kill this man who had blundered to his help and warn his

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* Over eons of upward development from what was perhaps an original simple type, these two specialized forms of humans developed.

Undoubtedly they were bred by selective mating. The "Masters," as now they were known upon Wandl, neglected the body for the brain; and the "Workers," the reverse. We saw a number of them, but they were wholly mechanical—built of inert materials by the scientific skill of the masters, directing the manual skill of the workers.

Biology may not perhaps be suitable to my narrative. I need only state that the masters and the workers were bi-sexual. There was no separate individual for the female. And, as in the case with primitive organisms upon Earth—and somewhat higher life-forms on Mars and Venus—the parent dies in the reproduction of the offspring.

Wasteful arrangement! Yet upon Wandl it was highly suitable. Many offspring were simultaneously born. Conditions of existence made a high percentage of them mature. The little planet was crowded now, and it was this which doubtless led them to the capture of our three worlds.

Much that I set down now is speculation, since with our brief stay upon Wandl we could only meddle. But there were prisoners we subsequently took who were made to talk.

Wandl was only one of a family of several planets revolving around their distant sun. The others, with beings doubtless more suitable to our larger globes, had even a greater need of our worlds. And Earth scientists think now that Wandl, in its own

escape, but the girls persuaded him to take Snap with them.

"Anita and Venus pretended never having seen me before," Snap whispered to me now. "You take the same line."

"If we get with them."

"We will."

"Snap, how can we get them out of this?"

"We'll work out something. If I couldn't use my strength to mash a hundred of these flimsy people, I'm a motor-oiler. It's good to have you with me, Gregg—though for your sake—"

And what a relief to me to be with him! Together we could fight our way out of this—get the girls away—do something to escape.

Futile hope! Logic told me so. But my triumphant heart at finding Anita and Venus—and being again with Snap—ignored logic.

"Watch out, Gregg! By the gods, you tell me I can crack my head and you move like that! Hang on to me; keep together. Shall we jump this? Or slide? Lord, we can't slide; we're not heavy enough!"

It was weird, this landing upon Wandl. We had left the vessel's side-ports and were descending what seemed a narrow, hundred-foot landing incline. We were outdoors, and it was night. Shafts of colored radiance flashed around us. The ship was poised on a disk-like platform, with skeleton legs. It seemed a hundred feet or more down to the ground level, from where the colored lights were darting up. Overhead was a cloudless purple-red sky of blurred, reddish stars. No doubt the curious atmosphere of Wandl gave the sky and stars this abnormal look.

SNAP and I were pushed down the incline, with half a dozen figures in advance of us and others behind us. Yet without difficulty we could have leaped down that hundred feet. Figures were leaping into mid-air from several pressure-ports of the ship. They did not fall, but floated, drifted, down. I saw one of the insect-like workers drop with motionless outstretched arms. Others came mounting up, using their arms and legs with sweeping strokes, as though swimming. Again, as in the pressure-room, I felt that it was like being under water—everything buoyant.

Strange, weird scene! I could not at first encompass it; a confusion, so that my mind only recorded fragments. The vessel wavering above us. The flashing lights; waving beams of

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interplanetary family, was wholly subservient to the others—a mere world of work, and now an emissary of war, sent by higher masters to do their bidding.

The gravity controls by which Wandl traveled in space—itself no more than a gigantic space-vehicle—were only glimpsed by me. Their nature has been guessed at: a titanic application of the attractive and repulsive rays. These rays undoubtedly also controlled the planet's rotation.

What a multiplicity of obscure wonders we glimpsed upon Wandl! The slowing rotation of the Earth caused climatic changes, volcanic and tidal disturbances—infinite cataclysmic disaster. But Wandl rotated and stopped at will! Undoubtedly she was equipped by nature to withstand the shock. Her internal fires could not break into eruption; she had very little fluid surface. And the nature of her atmosphere was such that it was not easily disturbed into storms. Yet one storm came, as precisely we were most disastrously to experience! The care with which ordinarily Wandl's rotation was handled, must have been relaxed. An error was made; and the storm came!

Other questions throng me. Earth, Venus and Mars were to be towed into interstellar space. I had, subsequently, a glimpse and a more detailed idea of how that could be accomplished. All life on our worlds would perish in the cold of that stellar journey. Yet Wandl had made the journey. Was her atmosphere inherently by nature such that it did not transmit rays of heat? Our scientists now think that is the answer. I recall that while on Wandl I never felt an added warmth during the brief, sunlit day we experienced. No heat rays seemed to come through the atmosphere from our sun. Conversely, when traversing interstellar space, the heat inherent in the planet, created no doubt by her intense fires, was preserved in adequate amount until the new and perhaps far greater and different quality of light and warmth of her own sun was reached.

radiance. A fantastic structure nearby; it reared itself several hundred feet, with lights on top and outlining its many lateral balconies one above the other. The air was full of the leaping, swimming, insect-like figures. The brains—the masters—were not in evidence. Then I saw one of them being carried, and others, floating down like distended falling balloons, to be caught by the workers in small nets and thus saved from jarring contact.

It was so different a scene from anything on Earth, Venus or Mars that my senses were bewildered.

Soap was suddenly whispering: "That fellow back of us is our guard. I can feel his ray; some form of attraction. It's pulling at me."

Soap was a little behind me. I turned and saw the faint radiance of a narrow light-beam upon him. It came from an instrument in an upper, shoulder hand of the insect figure following us—no doubt the reverse form of the same ray which the Wandl vessel had used to thrust the wrecked *Countess* toward the Moon. It was evident why we were made to descend this incline instead of leaping down: they felt doubtless they could more easily control us.

We reached the bottom. I saw now that the group of workers in advance of us were carrying metal cubes, seemingly of considerable weight, and so they also had to use the incline.

We stood presently on a smooth ground surface. We had not seen Anita and Vesta, nor Malo and his sister. The insect figure who was our guard came forward.

"You stand here. Malo comes."

"Where is he?" I demanded. "I want to see him. And—" I choked it back. I had very nearly mentioned the girls. "And talk with him."

"He comes, in a moment."

"I'm hungry." I gestured to my stomach. "Food. You know what that is?"

The brown, scaly face contorted for a smile—a ghastly grimace!

"Yes. I know what that is. You shall have food and drink."

It seemed that the hollow voice came, not from the neck, but from the shell-like, bulging chest. He stood aside, with the globular weapon of the ray in his pincer-hand.

WE waited, standing gingerly together, wavering with our slight weight. A wind would have blown us away. But there was no wind; instead, a heavy, sultry air, warm as a midsummer Earth night—warmer even than the Neo-time of Venus.

Soap and I were dressed much the same. Heavy boots, for which weight we gave thanks! Tight, pantaloon-like trousers, flaring at the top; and high-necked white blouses. Both of us were bareheaded. Doubtless we were as fantastic a sight to these Wandlites as they to us. Some of the workers crowded up, reaching out to pluck at us. But Soap waved them away, and our guard dispersed them.

One of the master brains came bouncing up. Upon his little upright body the great head wavered.

"You will wait here." His eyes glowed up at us.

"But listen," Soap began.

"You will wait here for the Martian. He has his orders to take you to the Great Intelligence. There is a meeting—" the little arm from the side of the head had a hand with a finger pointing for a gesture—"a meeting place there. We decide now what to do to destroy the warships of your worlds. I do not like your thoughts. They are black. I will inform the Great Intelligence when he can spare the thought for you."

He added something in the Wandl tongue. A worker came forward; lifted him carefully, held him in the hollow of an encircling tentacle. And with a bound, the worker sailed upward and was gone.

Again we stood through an interval. I noticed now that the towering structure near us, with its storied balconies, was not perpendicular. Its front curved up and back. It was convex, somewhat in the fashion of an irregular globe—a three hundred-foot ball, with a flattened base set here on the ground. The balconies were segments of its front curve. At the top, the roof was as though the ball had been sliced off—the whole like a giant apple with a slice gone for a base, and another for the roof. At the bottom was a huge portal, with a glow of light from within. And at the terraced balcony levels were lighted windows.

"Is that the meeting place?" Soap whispered.

"Probably. And look to the side of it, Soap."

THIS was a city. There was a vista of distance to one side of the great globe structure. Now that our eyes were more accustomed to the queerness of this night upon Wandl, we could ignore the colored light-beams of the landing stage and the disembarking palisade upon which we were standing. Gazing into the distance, the curvature of the surface of this little world was immediately apparent. The reddish firmament of stars came down to meet the sharply curving surface at a horizon line which seemed no more than a mile or so away.

Spread upon this near distance were a variety of structures, with little roads of open space winding between them. Most of the buildings seemed globular in shape. Some were small—little mound-shaped individual dwellings. Others were larger. Some were tiered, like half a dozen apples speared in a row upon a stick and set upright.

I saw a ribbon of what might be a river in the distance, with the reddish starlight glinting upon it. To our left, half a mile away perhaps, a row of buttes and rocks stood like a miniature range of mountains. The city seemed entirely to encompass them; and every little rock-peak had upon its top a globelike dwelling.

Lights were winking everywhere and figures that bounded a hundred feet or more, and sailed in an arc, coming down to the ground to bound again. A row of workers went by overhead. Not swimming, or leaping, but stiffly motionless. Tiny opalescent rays went from them to the ground, as though to give them power.

Five minutes of Earth-time might have passed while Soap and I gazed at this busy night-scene in this Wandl city upon the occasion of the landing of their ship, so triumphantly returned from its mission to Earth. As I stood, certainly a helpless captive if ever there was one, nevertheless a strange sense of my own power was within me. And Soap felt the same.

This was so small a world; the people were so flimsy. With a poke of my fist I could kill any one of these master brains. The ten-foot workers seemed mere shells, light and fragile. We had the realization, too, that even the buildings were light and flimsy. The little globe-houses on their sticks seemed to waver, almost like nodding flowers.*

It gave us, with our solid bodies, muscular strength and no gravity to impede us, the physical feeling that if we ran amuck we could smash everything we saw!

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* It was later established by Earth scientists, that the gravity of Wandl was about one thirty-fifth that of Earth. The giant brains weighed perhaps ten pounds on Earth, and only a few ounces on Wandl. The insect-like workers, though ten feet tall, were of a density far less than an Earthman. On Earth, those who were subsequently captured and weighed, averaged about thirty-five pounds—and hence had only a pound of weight on their native planet. They were strongly muscled; but it will be recalled that the one I saw in that insulated room of the Red Spark restaurant walked with a very heavy,

We became aware of Molo approaching us. He came down from overhead in a great leap from somewhere behind us. He landed somewhat awkwardly, half stumbled and almost fell, but gathered himself up and confronted us.

What a solid giant this seven-foot Martian seemed now in the midst of this buoyant, almost weightless city! He was still bareheaded, and wearing his garments of ornamented leather, with his brawny legs bare. Upon his feet were strange-looking wide-soled shoes. His hands and forearms were thrust into loops of small shields.†

Molo gained his balance and waved our guard aside. His gaze was on me.

"You are the new prisoner, taken from that wrecked Earth-ship?"

"Yes," I said.

"What is your name? You are an Earthman, evidently."

"Yes." I hesitated. I had seen Molo and heard him talk, back there in Great-New York; but he had not seen me, or heard of me, doubtless.

"Gregg Haljan," I added. "My name, Gregg Haljan. I am a skilled navigator; perhaps it was fortunate you saved me."

He flung me a look, and there was a tinge of amusement in it.

"You would save your own skin now?"

"Yes," I said. "Why not? You are a Martian, and this is a war also against Mars."

His look darkened, but then again sardonic amusement struck him.

"We shall see what the Great Master says. There will be a few of our type humans—men and women—wanted when the worlds begin anew. The Great Master said so; he wants to study life on Earth as it was before the great destruction."

"It's not destroyed yet," Soap said abruptly.

"No. But soon. You speak with a very warlike tone, little Earthman."

"Nevertheless," said Soap, "as I've already told you on the ship coming here, I'm thankful enough you snatched me out of that destruction."

"We shall see." His glance swept behind us. I turned to see three figures approaching. My heart pounded. They were Anita, Venus, and Molo's sister, Meka. They came slowly, trying to walk, with balancing outstretched arms. Strange-looking creatures, these three girls of our different worlds, here upon this weird new planet. The six-foot Martian girl wore her same leather jacket and flaring leather trousers; Anita and Venus were blouse and skirted, and still clung to their outer dark cloaks.

With a dozen curious Wandl workers crowding them, they came and joined Molo before us. My heart was pounding; Soap nudged at me. I saw Anita and Venus involuntarily start a little as they recognized me; but I flung them a curious, impersonal stare.

"You are here," said Molo. "Good. We go now." He beat over Soap and me. "I advise you make no effort to leap away, though it may seem easy."

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dragging tread. One might wonder that he could walk at all, with thirty-five times his normal gravity impeding him. But that is a wrong way of looking at it. On Wandl, he could fly, with very small artificial wings fastened to his arms, which soon I was to see. On Earth, his powerful muscles were impeded by an added burden of thirty-four pounds. An ant can carry a burden similarly great in proportion to its body weight.

But the brains had very little muscular strength. Their ten pounds of Earth-weight crushed the little flabby body under the weight of the head, so that they could not even stand upright.

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†These shields—as one might term them—were constructed of a heart-shaped flexible framework, covered with an opaque membrane. They were about two feet long and half as wide. With a hand and forearm thrust into fabric loops, the shields served as "wings," so that the arms had more thrust against the air. With a swimming stroke, a sustained flight was attained.

"Not me," said Soap. "Where would I go? Alone in this damn world—I can't very well leap back to Earth, can I?"

"True enough," said Malo. "You have sense, little fellow. But I just warn you: the guard who will watch you always is very sharp of eye. And the weapons here bring very swift death."

I could feel Anita's gaze upon me, but I did not dare look her way.

"Start," I said. "You will have no trouble with me."

With Malo leading us and the giant insect-like guard following close behind, we made our slow, awkward way across the esplanade portals of the huge globular building.

And within, we traversed a cylinder-like, padded corridor and came presently upon the strangest interior scene I had ever beheld.

CHAPTER XIV

Like Flies in a Globe

THE room was so large that it seemed almost the entire interior of the building. It was a globular room, a hundred and fifty feet or more in diameter. The inner surface was crowded with people. It was a huge, hollow interior of a ball; and upon its concave carving surface a throng of the brown-shelled workers were gathered. They sat on low seats at the curved bottom of the room, where we entered, and up the sides and upon the top, like flies in a globe, hanging head downward! There was no up or down here; the slight gravity made little difference.

I gazed up amazed to where, a hundred and fifty feet above me, head downward, the crowd of figures were calmly seated. They were clinging, of course; the pound-weight of each of them would drop them down if they let loose. But it required only a slight effort.

Between the tiers, there were narrow open aisles, bearing glow-lights at intervals. With Malo leading us, we started up the carving incline of one of these aisles.

"Gregg! Good Lord, it's weird!" Soap was gripping me. "Where are we going to sit? Don't speak to the girls; not yet."

"Have you spoken to them, Soap?"

"Yes. A little—on the ship. They're watching an opportunity; got to be cautious. Gregg, I've got so much to tell you—but no chance. The brains can almost hear your thoughts."

We went only a short distance up the incline. There were vacant seats seemingly held ready for us. Our passage created a commotion among the figures. Some leaped up and over us to get a better look. I found that we were clinging to the mound-like convex surface of a small half-globe. It raised us some ten feet above the floor. There were low seats, with arms. I sat, clinging to the arm against the side-pull of gravity. And I found Anita close beside me. Her hand touched me, but she did not turn her head, or speak.

Malo was on my other side. I chanced to see his feet. They were planted firmly on the floor. He wore wide-soled shoes equipped with suction pads, which would enable him, like the Wandilites, to walk and stand upon the upper inner surfaces of buildings.

As during those moments when Soap and I stood on the landing esplanade, there was so much of weirdness here that at first I could not encompass it. But now, as we settled down like the rest of this audience, quiet and expectant, I began to grasp other details of the strange scene.

Poised in mid-air, almost exactly in the center of the huge globular room, was a metal globe of some thirty feet diameter. It was held, not by any solid girders, but by four narrow beams of light which mounted to it from widespread points of the convex room.

Upon the entire surface of this thirty-foot globe, a group of the masters were seated, in little cup-like seats upon resilient stems, so that they swayed and nodded with movement. There were instruments here, also. Strange, indescribable devices! There seemed to be glowing wires and grids, and thread-like beams of light carrying current. Light-threads shot from the mechanisms to the heads of the seated brains. All the devices were evidently in operation; and upon this poised central globe the attention of the audience was directed.

MOLO beat over me. "The Great Intelligence soon will see you."

Soap, from the other side of Molo, whispered:

"What are they doing up there?"

It was a local receiving station of events on Earth, Mars and Venus. The interplanetary bellos to us are commonplace. Local sound and image radiophones I could understand. But here was a new science. The faint hiss and throb of the devices were audible. I stared, trying to understand. Images, and sounds, invisible and inaudible, were being received from across the millions of miles of space—and they were being transmuted within the brains themselves. I saw upon the bulging foreheads of the brains that disks were fastened, upon which the tiny light-beams carrying the vibrations impinged.

What a miracle of nature is a human mind! These brains, receiving "ether-waves" of some unknown variety, were, within the mechanism of the brain-cell, transmuting, translating the vibrations into things knowable! They were not seeing, not hearing—but *knowing* what was transpiring across those millions of miles of space!

Incredible? I thought so, at first. Yet now I realize that the most fleeting reasoning thought of the human mind is a thing incredible beyond human understanding.*

Again Molo beat over me. "They are about to show this audience what is going on across space."

Upon the thirty-foot globe I saw now a dozen or so balls of about three-foot diameter. They had been dark and I had not noticed them. Now they began glowing, not from wires carrying a current, but from the little heads of the brains touching them.

Weird sight! I stared at the brain nearest me on the curve of the thirty-foot globe. His flabby little arm was extended; his head touched the image ball; gave it light and color—like a fabled fortune teller of Earth with a crystal before her!

THE crystal ball gleamed with color and form. Even though I was some fifty or sixty feet from it, I could see the moving image clearly. And recognized it! The Tappan Interplanetary Stage. Ships were rising; two of our space-ships mounting.

And all in an instant the scene blurred, took form again.... The red-green spires and minarets of Ferrok-Shahn. The Central Canal extended like a gash across the foreground; the "Mushroom Mountains" were in a line upon the horizon. Three Martian space-flyers slid up in that movement while I watched.

And now Grebber. The silver forest in all its shining beauty—where Venus was born. The sunlight sparkled on the river. A space-ship was rising in the distant sky over the shining forest.

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* It is obvious that even the prodigious mind-capacity of the Wandlite masters could hold of knowing and understanding even a small fraction of *Universal Knowledge*. Here, obviously, they specialised in what they endeavored to know. It is obvious also that they absorbed knowledge, comparable to us, with an extraordinary speed. Thus, by listening upon Mars, Venus and the Earth, they learned the ruling languages of each.

Beyond Anita, I heard Venus murmuring:

"Home! If only we were there!" And I could feel Anita move to silence her.

Our ships rising to battle! Molo was whispering:

"They come! But we will be ready for them."

Another image: mid-space. The allied ships gathering, waiting for others to arrive. A group here of about ten of our ships, gathered from the three worlds; poised, waiting.

I was aware that upon the mound-like protuberance of the room-floor where we were sitting, a door was opening. It slid, or melted away. At our feet was an opening downward into the small interior of the mound.

Molo whispered, "The Great Master! Sit quiet! He will talk to us."

Over us now a barrage was growling. It came with a hiss—a circular curtain of insulation. The huge globular room faded. We were alone on the mound; Snap, Molo, myself, Anita, Venus and Meka upon the end of our beach. Behind us stood our single Wandlite guard, with a weapon in his shoulder-band.

At our feet an opening yawned into the mound-interior. It was a tiny, lighted room. In a cup-like seat a brain was perched, just below the level of our feet: the Great Master brain of Wandl. He was alone here. Not attended by retinue; no pomp and ceremony to usher us into his presence; no underlings obsequiously bowing to mark him for a great ruler.

We stared down, and the great brain stared up at us, seemingly equally curious. His head was a full four feet in diameter, grotesquely distended. From this close viewpoint I could see the gorged, knotted blood-vessels pulsating. The little body sat in the cup, with dangling legs. The clothes were ornamented; there was a glowing device on the chest.

HE spoke with a measured rumble, in Martian.

"You are Molo, of Ferrok-Shaka."

It was barely a question; more a statement.

"Yes," said Molo.

"You must say, 'Yes, Great Master.' That is ignorance."

"Yes, Great Master."

"I know about you. I understand that we trust you."

The huge round eyes next fastened upon me. Then to Snap, and back to me. The words were English this time.

"Men of Earth, are you decided, like the Martian, to join with us?"

There was a moment when we did not answer. I tried with sudden vehemence to still my thoughts, or to change them so that they lied. Impossible task! Fear surged upon me. Could this vast mechanism of human mind here at my feet interpret the vibrations of my thoughts? Could this Great Master of Wandl see into my mind?

The brain added, "You are confused what to say. You do not want to die?"

"No," we both answered.

"You shall not, unless you attempt to cause us trouble. Your thoughts are black. Have they ever been read?" He addressed his question to Molo.

"No, Great Master."

"When opportunity comes, have them read." He added to Snap and me:

"I plan to take prisoners. My Supreme Rulers ordered it.* When your worlds are vacant of life, those who commanded me will want some of you left alive to be studied. Your thoughts are very black, Earthmen. I

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*The reference probably was to the rulers of a neighboring and more powerful planet, which had sent Wandl upon her mission of conquest.

think when they are carefully read you will prove no great advantage to us."

There was irony in the voice, and upon the monstrous bulging face came the horrible travesty of a grin. If he read our thoughts, doubtless he felt them beneath his attention.

THE grin on the brain's face faded. His interest went again to Molo.

"That is your sister." The eyes swung to Meka and back.

"Yes, Great Master."

"She is caring for this Earth-girl and this girl from Venus?"

"Yes, Great Master. I am fond of them. I have plans—"

"They are in your charge, Martian. I will not interfere with you. But guard them well. I trust you and your sister. You have done well, so far. These others—"

"The Earth and the Venus girl can be of help to me," Molo added.

"How?"

"They knew young men who were in the space-ship Service. They can tell me the armament of men and guns on most of the space-ships which Earth will send against us."

Did Molo really believe that? Probably not, but he wanted the girls with him. Nor did the brain believe it, for again came that grotesque smile.

"Let them not bother you, Martian. You have work to do. Listen carefully. There will be a battle. Earth, Mars and Venus may perhaps have a hundred vehicles. I cannot bring destruction upon those three worlds in a day. We soon will make contact with the light-beam you placed on Earth. That I will show you. But the rotation cannot be stopped at once. It will take time.

"The enemy ships might dare to come to Wandl. But I shall not wait for that. All my space-ships are very nearly ready. If there is to be a battle, it shall be far from here, in the neighborhood of the enemy worlds. We are at this time about sixty-two million of your miles from the Earth; a third less than that from Mars, and about a third more from Venus. . . . I understand, Martian, that you are skilled in space warfare."

Well might he be, with his Star-Streak plundering for years on interplanetary shipping!

The brain went on.

"I have given you a vessel to command. You will be surprised to know its name. The Star-Streak."

Meka gasped, "But you destroyed it!"

"Only wrecked it, Martian girl. It is repaired now. You, Molo—and your sister to help you—who could command it to more advantage? All your own weapons, and ours of Wandl have been added. You may select your crew. Is it to your liking?"

"Master, yes."

"You will be housed in this city, Wor, in the dwelling-globe you occupied before. Keep your prisoners with you, if you like."

"These two Earthmen—" began Molo, but he was interrupted.

"Settle that later; I do not want the annoyance."

I was dimly conscious of a great clanging, coming through the curtain of barrage which was over us.

The brain added hastily, "Keep the guard with you, Wyk, to guard the prisoners; he will also attend your needs. In the battle, Martian, I expect great things of your Star-Streak."

"Master, you will not be disappointed."

"And prisoners—but not too many. Bring me a few young specimens, like these, representative of Venus, Mars and the Earth. I want both of the sexes; an equal number of each."

"Yes, Master."

"The warning signal is coming. You will now see our first contact."

THE light at our feet was fading. It clung last to the grotesque face of the huge brain; the goggling eyes above green, and as the light in the little mezzanine-room dimmed there was in a moment nothing left but those lurid green pools of the brain's eyes.

Then I was aware that the aperture at our feet had closed. Over us, the barrage curtain was dissipating: sight and sound coming in to us. The great bell-shaped conclave room again became visible, the audience crowding its entire inner surface.

I suddenly felt Anita's fingers twitching at my sleeve.

"Gregg, dear one—"

"Anita—"

"Gregg, can you hear me?"

"Yes. Careful!"

But Molo was gazing up to where, over our heads, the crowd of people were shifting, bending so that they all seemed gazing at their feet. A dim white radiance, seeming to come from down here somewhere near us, lay in a splotch on a segment of the throng overhead. Molo was watching.

I whispered, "All right, Anita. Quick; what is it?"

"The great control station—somewhere not far from here. Venus and I have been trying to find out where it is. We—"

She stopped, evidently fearful of Molo. Then she added:

"Gregg, we—Gregg, dear, we haven't been guarded very closely: they're not suspicious of us. If we can get—"

"Later, Anita! Can't talk now."

"No. Watch our chance. Later. . . ."

I turned toward Molo. "What's that up there?"

"The transparent ray. It is opening the top of the globe to our sight."

The clanging signal gong had stilled. The audience was hushed and expectant. The white patch of light overhead spread until it encompassed all the top of the globe. The people there, hanging head downward to us, were bent double, gazing expectantly to their feet. The whole area was glowing. The people were white spectral shapes—transparent! And the top of the globe was transparent; I saw the night sky, with the gleaming, reddish stars.

IT was, in a moment, as though we were staring up at a huge square window orifice cut in the top of the room. A broad vista of cloudless sky and stars was visible. Across it, like a shining sword, was a narrow opalescent beam.

"The Earth-beam which I planted," Molo whispered triumphantly. "Our control station will contact with it now. The first contact!"

The first contact! The Earth was below our angle of vision. The beam from Great-New York, sweeping the sky with the Earth's rotation, was passing now comparatively close to Wandl. A million miles, possibly—passing with a rapid sweep of movement. I could almost see the movement now.

There was an expectant moment. Then into the sky leaped another ray, narrow, luridly green. It swung up from some Wandl source perhaps not far from us, swung and darted out into space. The hissing, agonized electrical scream from it as it burst through the Wandl atmosphere was deafening. I saw it strike the Earth-beam, grip it with a blinding burst of radiance up there in the sky, clinging—pulling—using the rigid, opalescent ray from Great-New York as a titanic lever. Pulling, for a moment, against the rotation of the Earth with a lever sixty million miles long.

A moment of screaming sound in the atmosphere around us, and that conflict of light in the sky. Then the current power of the control station seemed to become exhausted. The screaming suddenly stilled. The Wandl beam vanished. The conflict was gone from the sky.

The Earth-beam still swept the heavens like a stiff, upstanding sword. But in that moment when Wandl gripped it, the axis of the Earth had been changed a little; the rotation was slowed; by a few minutes, the day and the night on Earth were lengthened.

What myriad catastrophic consequences! It was the beginning of Earth's desolation!

CHAPTER XV

The Escape

"BUT when do we eat?" Soap demanded.

"Soon," said Molo.

"I hope so."

We were leaving the great room. The spectators were still there. The transparent ray was gone from the roof; attention again was centered upon the thirty-foot receiving globe.

We left as we had come. Walking? I can only call it that, though the word is futile to describe our progress as we made our way to the lighted esplanade, across its side and into what might have been called a street. Globular houses, single, or one set upon another, or half a dozen swaying on a stick . . . gardens of vegetation and flowers. . . . I saw what seemed to be a round patch of hundred-foot tree-stalks, like a thick patch of bamboo. It was laced and latticed thick with vines.

"A . . . house!" Soap murmured. "That's a house!"

Another type of dwelling. This flimsy patch of vegetable growth, so flimsy that it was all stirring with the movement of a slight breeze, was woven into circular, thatched rooms—bird's nests of little dwellings. Staring up, I seemed to see a hundred of them. Rope-vine ladders; flimsy vine platforms; tiny lights winking up there in the trees.

On a platform twenty feet above us a group of tiny infant brains sat in a precarious row, goggling down at us.

We passed the tree patch; again the city seemed all a thin, flexible metal. The ground was like a smooth rock surface, alternating with small patches of soil where things were growing.

We walked in a slow, unsteady line. Molo led. Behind Soap and me came the girls, ignoring us; and at the rear, the brown-shelled giant guard stalked after us.

Molo stopped at a globe-dwelling. It was quite large; about fifty feet.

"We rest here. I will go see that our rooms are ready." He gestured to his sister. "Meka, you come with me. Wyk will guard them here for a moment."

WE stood at an oval doorway. A worker had come out, stared at us, and gone back in again. On an upper balcony, a brain was gazing down at us.

I caught Molo's brawny arm. "See here, won't you tell us what's going to happen to us?"

"You will rest here in charge of Wyk."

"What are you going to do?" said Soap.

"I am going to select my men for my ship. We go out, to the battle."

"When?" I demanded.

"In a few hours. By Earth-time, what you would call three or four hours."

"And you're taking us on the ship, Molo? Where is your *Star-Streak?*"

"That I must find out." He gazed at us with a slow, faint smile. "Not far. Nothing is far, on Wandl. I do not know if I will take you on the ship. You might be of help in the navigating—or you might be troublesome. The Great Master wants prisoners, or I would have killed you long ago."

He took his sister and left us. There was a brief moment when Wyk, incuriously standing aside, gave us opportunity for swift whispers.

Again Anita clutched me. "Gregg, we'll be separated now. But with Molo gone, Veara and I can get away from Meka!"

"Gregg, listen! Soap, be quiet!" Veara whirled on us. "If we're ever going to escape, now is the time. You, with this Wyk—get away from him! We'll handle Meka."

"And do what?" Soap demanded.

"The control station! It's near here somewhere. We'll find out where!"

Swift whispers! Anita again:

"We've got to wreck it, Gregg! Whatever else—wreck it—stop those contacts! They'll mean the end of Earth if we don't!"

I protested. "Better try for Molo's vessel. We might be able to navigate it! Escape from this world!"

"The control station first," Anita insisted. "Gregg, we know something about it! You and Soap, with your strength, can demolish it. And then, if we can locate the *Star-Streak*—"

DESPERATE, mad plan! But there seemed nothing better. The girls insisted now that though they did not know where the control station was located, they knew the details of its interior; its physical layout; its human operators. It would be feasible for us to get into it, and wreck it!

"In an hour," whispered Soap. "Have you got a timer? Is it going?"

The little timers we still had with us were undoubtedly operating differently from on Earth; but they were in agreement.

"An hour by our timers," I whispered. "We'll make the break then. Try and find you inside. Anita, if you get free of Meka, don't come out."

"No! All right!"

We had only a moment to try and plan it. And with our whispers, a desperation swept us; and again came that sense of physical power. Once loose in this fairy world we could smash and wreck everything we touched. And leap, swim—fly away—free!

Mad, wild plans! There was so much that we could not foresee!

"Anita, in an hour, with Molo gone—"

He came suddenly with a driving leap from the doorway and dropped among us.

"All is ready. Come . . ."

We ignored the girls. Soap again protested that he was hungry, which indeed, for me at least, was certainly the truth. And I was parched with thirst. For all one's plans—worlds at stake; the desperation of planning that might bring nothing but immediate death—for all that, the needs of the body make their insistent demands. I felt that this vaunted strength of my Earth body would not last long without food and drink.

WE entered the globular interior. There were narrow corridors; triangular rooms; a slatted, ladder-like incline leading upward to a higher level.

The girls followed Meka up the incline. I recall that last tense and furtive look which Anita cast down at me, as though warning, that we try and see where they were taken.

Molo and Wyk herded us into a nearby room.

"You will have your food and drink here. Cause Wyk no trouble and you will be quite safe."

He turned from us, but Soap plucked at him.

"When are you coming back?"

"I do not know. Not too long."

"But, see here—that control station: is that where your ship is located? Is it near?"

I brushed against Soap. Molo could so easily become suspicious of such questions.

"We will cause you no trouble," I said. "But do not leave us here. Take us on the ship."

"I will see."

He murmured to Wyk in Martian, and then left us.

This hour of waiting! It seemed extraordinarily long. Perhaps it was, since our timers might very well be running at half rate.

The small triangular room had no windows and only the single door. Wyk touched a mechanism and it slid closed. The place was a quiet apartment, indeed. The floor was convex, curving upward to the walls. The light radiance dimly glowed, as though inherent to the metal ceiling. There was strange metal furniture. A table and chairs, high and large. Books of a size evidently for the ten-foot workers. . . .

The door opened, and a worker brought us food and drink. Wyk sat apart and watched us while we consumed the meal. I noticed that he seldom let himself get close to us. He sat stiffly upright, with his jointed legs bent double under him, his many arms and pincers hanging inert, save the one short shoulder-arm with flexible fingers gripping his small weapon. At his waist, and upon several book-like protuberances of his chest, other weapons and devices were hanging.

SNAP gazed up from where, on the floor, we were ravenously eating and drinking.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No. Not now."

"You eat often?"

"No. Not very."

Incurious, taciturn creature, this insect-like being. Snap whispered. "Got to talk to him; make him let us get close! That weapon—"

How the weapon operated we did not know. But that a flash from it would bring instant death we well imagined. Thoughts thronged me. If we could get within reach of Wyk, grip his weapon, we could easily kill him. But then what? Were other workers within sound of us here in this house? Listening, we could hear nothing beyond our room walls. Were we, perhaps, being watched by scientific devices; spied upon? Guards, outside in the corridors? Or was Wyk our only guard? Where were the girls? If we killed Wyk could we get out through this door and find them? How could they get loose from Mela?

And if we freed ourselves, then what? Running amuck on this strange planet! This whole world against us!

Half of that hour of waiting was passed.

I said to Wyk, "You would call this night on your world; the sun obviously is on the other hemisphere. When will it be day?"

His gaze swung on me. His hollow voice, deep from the capacious shell of chest, echoed and blurred in the room.

"I think Wandl has no rotation now. Or almost none."

He was not taciturn, as he had seemed, and presently we had him talking. We learned several things regarding the gravity-controls of Wandl, by which at will the planet could be rotated on its axis; and by which also it could navigate space. We learned that the great control station contained these gravitational mechanisms, as well as the mechanism by which the Earth light-beam had been attacked. But we could not discover where on Wandl that station was located.

Then, with our meal finished, Snap rose to his feet.

"Those arms of yours, they seem to us very strange. But they must be mighty useful."

Snap had taken a cautious, shoring step. It wafted him directly toward our guard.

The weird, brown-scaled face of Wyk, with its popping eyes upon stems and its up-ended mouth, contorted with surprise.

"Back! Don't come near me!"

HE flung himself back, but struck the wall of the room. All his arms were writhing. Alarm was in his voice. It was the first time either Snap or I had made an unexpected move, and it startled Wyk.

"Back!"

But Snap could not get back. His feet were off the floor. His five pounds of weight drifted him forward. He struck against Wyk.

"Wait! Let me go!" Snap cried.

Wyk's longest arms were around Snap, like the tentacles of an octopus. And Snap was struggling—fighting! We had not intended this, but the opportunity was here!

I scrambled from the floor. This horrible weightlessness! Now, with the need for powerful action, the lack of gravity was a tremendous handicap. I went up with flailing arms into the air. Wyk fired his weapon, but it missed me—a soundless, dimly white bolt. It hissed along the curving wall of the room. The smell of it was a stench in my nostrils.

I hit the concave ceiling, shoved down, and like a swimmer in water struck against the struggling bodies of Snap and the guard. The waving little shoulder arm with the weapon came at me.

Snap shouted. "Gregg, look out! Let go of me, you! I'll smash you!"

I seized the little arm; it felt like the shell of a huge crab. For a moment we were all three entangled, floundering, unable to find a foothold. Then suddenly I felt Snap pulling me loose.

"We've got him!"

The brown-shelled body of Wyk sank away from us, hit the floor and lay still. I felt the floor under me, and Snap clutching at me.

"Got him! God—this gruesome...."

I followed his gaze. In my hand I was clutching Wyk's little shoulder arm, with the fingers still gripping the weapon. I had jerked it out of his shoulder-socket. . . .

With a shudder I cast the noisome thing away. Whether Wyk was dead or not we did not know. He lay on his back; the hideous face stared upward.

"I—cracked the shell," Snap gasped. "He's dead—or if he isn't yet, what matter? We've got to get out of here. Somebody will have heard the noise. Got to get the girls loose, now."

A PANIC of excitement was upon us. We wasted no further time on the prone figure of Wyk. Snap snatched several of his weapons and mechanical devices. We stowed them hastily in our pockets; one was like another to us; we could only guess at their uses.

"His shoes, Gregg. I can't get the damned things off him!"

"Here are shoes."

A little pile of shoes was in a corner of the room: wide, resilient suction soles, built like sandles. They were very large, but the thongs were so placed that it seemed we could fasten them to our boots.

"But not now, Snap."

We snatched up four pairs of the shoes.

There seemed nothing else to do. Could we get the door open? Snap was already fumbling at it.

"Accursed thing! It won't—"

Then it slid open. The dim corridor was visible. No one—nothing—out there.

"Come on, Gregg! In a rush!"

We went like bouncing rubber figures up the incline ladder.

"Snap, watch out!" He all but cracked his head with an upward leap. Every instant we expected to be set upon. There was a terraced upper hall, black with shadow; dark ovals of doorways led into rooms.

No one here. As yet we were not discovered.

We stood at the intersection of two corridors. One went almost vertically up, like a chimney extend-

ing into the dome peak of the globe. Its sides were latticed; we could go up it hand over hand, like monkeys. The other sloped at an angle downward.

"Which way?" Snap whispered. "What do you think? Got to find them."

It still lacked five or ten minutes of our designated time. Caution came to me. It would not do to burst recklessly in upon the girls, perhaps to find Molo and several guards there.

"Let's wait a minute. We'll listen; see if we can't get some idea."

I never finished. We were backed against the corridor wall, almost in darkness. From the dark length of the descending corridor came a thump. The sound of a struggle! And then a muffled scream! Venza! And we heard her words:

"Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

As though diving into water, Snap and I plunged head-first into the blackness of the corridor.

CHAPTER XVI

The Flight Across Wandl

"BUT Meka, won't you tell us about this world?" Anita asked. "It seems so wonderful."

"That control station," Venza put in: "where is it from here?"

The Martian girl sat watching Anita and Venza at their meal. She had bolted her own food and now sat apart. She was a taciturn, dour sort of person, this Meka. She seldom smiled, seldom spoke. With her six feet of height, her brawny muscular figure, her ornamental leather garments, she was masculine of aspect. Competent, undoubtedly intelligent; capable of doing a man's work. Upon the *Star-Streak*, during those years of its piracy, very probably she played a leading part with Molo.

Venza and Anita were afraid of her. They knew that Meka was suspicious of them. They had won Molo's confidence; since he was a man that was comparatively easy. But the Martian girl was a different problem. Her inscrutable eyes were always on them.

Venza and Anita were in a fever of tense excitement now; but outwardly they strove to appear calm and casual. When they parted from Snap and me, with our desperate plan to break loose within an hour arranged, Meka had taken them to an upper level apartment of the globe room. It was a small room, very much like the one in which Wyk was guarding us downstairs, save that this upper one had both a door and a small window. There was a little catwalk balcony outside the window. It seemed about thirty feet to the ground level. Anita stared out, but Meka came, pushed her away and pulled down a metal blind. Whether she locked it shut or not, they could not determine.

Then a worker brought the food. Venza and Anita had a moment to snatch whispers when Meka went to the door.

"You think she's got any weapons, Anita?"

"No; it seems not. I can't see any, can you?"

"We'll watch our chance and nip her. She's strong, all right, but with two of us—"

"Hush! She's coming back!"

They waited for the hour to pass, as we downstairs were waiting. They were sorry that we had all determined to wait that hour. Every passing moment might bring some new hazard; but they had feared Molo would linger.

WITH the meal almost eaten, they tried to talk to the taciturn Meka. She sat near them, staring with her somber, thoughtful gaze. If only they could make her talk! There was so much that they did not know—things vital when once we were loose.

"Where is the control station from here?" Venza asked. "What's the matter with you; can't you talk?"

There was no answer.

"Don't you know?" Anita demanded.

"No."

"Your brother said it was just beyond the dark forest. What is the dark forest?"

"A place with trees where no one lives."

"Oh, that way." Venza gestured. "That's what Melo said. Listen—will it be day soon, or will the night keep on?"

"If they cause Wendi to rotate, it will soon be day." A flicker of irony crossed Meka's face. "Save your breath, for I am in no mood for answering your silly questions."

It seemed [illegible] no weapons. [illegible] coils draped on her [illegible]

[illegible] said he was going to his ship," Venza was saying. "Where is the *Star-Streak?* Near the control station? Or is it here in the city?"

"Save your breath."

Venza laughed. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it. For a fact, there's not much air in here."

She shoved herself across the floor toward the closed window.

"Get back!"

"Oh, all right—all right."

Perhaps Meka herself felt that there was not enough air. She stood waveringly upright, and pushed herself with a slow leap for the window. Her back for that moment was to Anita and Venza. Their opportunity had suddenly, unexpectedly come! They shoved from the floor, whirled through the air and were upon her.

IT was a brief struggle. With physical violence, in their desperation, a frenzy swept Venza and Anita. They clawed at their antagonist; bit and tore and kicked. And instantly they knew they had lost. The huge Martian was so strong! She whirled and flung them off. Her upflung fist, with a blow like a man's, caught Anita's thigh, knocked her toward the ceiling. She sank in a heap to the floor; saw that Venza had been shoved back, but was standing upright.

Anita beat double, with her feet braced against a chair, tensed to shove forward again. At the still unopened window, Meka crouched.

Anita heard Venza's warning outcry.

"Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

Upon this scene, in a moment, Snap and I came with a rush. The closed door was not barred. We slid it down and catapulted through the opening. Meka sailed over us. I swung up at her; seized her. The knife ripped my blouse and slit the flesh of my upper arm with a glancing blow. Then Snap came and struck against us. We sank to the floor.

Meka had fought silently, but now she was shouting. I twisted her wrist, seized the knife handle and flung the knife away. I was aware of Anita lunging to retrieve it. And over us Venza appeared, waving a metal chair as though it were a huge feather.

Snap gasped, "Shut up, you! Gregg—this accursed uproar! Get your hand over her mouth! Shut her up!"

We had her subdued in a moment. But it seemed almost too late. Outside the opened door a distant shout sounded!

I shoved Meka toward the door. "If you don't do what I say, I'll kill you!" I hissed it into her ear. She thought I meant it; I think myself that I did.

"What shall I do?"

There came another distant shout—closer, now. Someone was coming.

"Call out in Martian. Say no trouble. Nothing wrong. You were arguing with these girls."

She did as I commanded. The voice down the corridor answered, and then subsided.

SNAP slid the door upon us. "Hurry! We'll go by the window. Those damn shoes; I dropped them."

Anita and Venus tore their dark cloaks into strips. We bound and gagged Meka; laid her in a corner of the room. We had dropped the shoes as we came plunging through the door oval. We found that we could all four fasten their thongs to our feet. I put Meka's knife in my belt.

"Hurry, all of you!" Snap was saying. "Got to get out of here; jump by the window!"

"Say, look at these wing-shields!" From a recess in a corner of the room Venus appeared with an armful of the small shields. We thrust our heads and forearms into their loops. The shields extended from a few inches beyond our fingers to the elbow.

Snap had slid the window blind. I beat over the prone form of Meka. "Don't try to move. You'll be all right. Melo will release you when he comes back."

We gathered on the starlit balcony. The city stretched around us. There was as yet no alarm. No swimming figures near here; but a distance away we saw the towering conclave globe, with its audience just beginning to emerge, like bees coming from a hive!

"Let me go first." I held Anita and Venus at the rail. "Like swimming—I suppose we'll get the way of it pretty quickly."

I balanced on the rail, and then leaped off. With the others after me, we struggled and swam awkwardly upward into the reddish starlight.

This strange flight! But it was not difficult to learn. Indescribably strange—like swimming; yet the thrust of the shield against the air had a less ponderable stroke than the head and arm in water. It was more like awkward birds struggling to fly.

BUT we learned it. In a group we mounted upward. The city structures dropped away, showing in a dark blur with winking lights. Over us were the stars and the cloudless night sky. Behind, the flashing little beams of radiance at the landing stage, the figures fluttering the great globe—it all dropped swiftly beneath a sharply curving horizon....

We had passed the city. A thousand feet below us a dark forest stretched. It was beyond this, so the girls understood, the control station was located.

The swimming flight was momentarily less awkward. But it was an effort, a panting effort in this abnormal Wandl air. Snap and Venus were behind me. Anita was leading—a strange, bird-like little figure! White blouse; long parted dark skirt from which her grey-sheathed legs kicked out as she swam, sometimes half upon one side, or with a breast stroke; and the braids of her dark hair falling forward over her shoulders.

She was tiring; I could not miss it. How far we had gone I had no idea—ten miles, perhaps. There was only a small vista of this little world visible at once, it was so sharply convex.

A line of distant mountains was to our left. We had crossed a river at the forest edge.

I suppose we had been half an hour swimming these ten miles. Was daylight coming? It seemed that the side-line of mountain-tops had a little light on them. The opalescent beam from Earth had swept this portion of the sky and was gone below our horizon.

Apparently there was no pursuit from the city. There had been occasional figures in the distance—some with power beams—but none seemed to be coming after us.

Behind me, Venus panted. "Say, I'm about finished up. Can't we—rest?"

With this altitude we could cease our efforts and drift down. It would take several minutes.

WE gathered together, falling with a slow drift toward the dark forest under us. The trees seemed huge and spindly—a porous growth, something on the Martian style, with huge leaves and a tangle of matter vines. They came mounting up at us as we fell with slowly gathering speed.

"Shall we go on?" I suggested.

"Yes. I'm all right now." But she was not. Anita, too, was very tired.

"Land in the tree-tops," Snap suggested. "Take a decent rest. I wonder how much further it is. These weapons—equipment—some of it is flying power, no doubt."

There was so much that we did not know! And suddenly I doubted the wisdom of this escape we had made. We were alone here on a strange planet. The alarm would be out for us presently. They would hunt us down, kill us instantly, once we were caught. There was no doubt of that now. What a wild idea that we could get to this control station and smash it!

"Look here," I said; "Anita, where is the *Star-Streak?*"

But that the girls did not know.

Anita said, "If we can land in the trees—examine what devices you've got—can't we do it here in the air?"

The girls had carefully watched Malo upon several occasions. They thought they might find we had a hand-globe or two of the repulsive ray. With it we could attain rapid flight without effort.

We sank, fluttering, into a dark and tangled mass of the forest tree-top growth. I recall that I had understood Wandl was crowded with the human population. Yet here this dark and silent forest evidently was untenanted. We clung, like flapping awkward birds, to a swaying limb of a tree-top. The trees were close together. A matted growth of air vines, leaves and pods made almost a surface up here on which we could have run. The limb was porous as a banana trunk. The whole tangle was so flimsy that, thrashing in it, we could have wrenched and torn it apart.

The limb swayed and bent under our slight weight. We seemed a full two hundred feet above the ground. Dark forest aisles, thickets and underbrush were vaguely visible down there. But no lights; no roads; no evidence that upon a crowded planet, where space was important, this forest of twenty miles or more was tenanted. I wondered why.

"Let's see what you've got," Vena demanded.

WE handed the girls the various little devices we had taken from Wyk. They were most of them the size of my fist; globular metallic projectors like little hand-bombs; ray cylinders; a device with multiple barrels the size of one's finger, set in the small circumference of a circular grid of wires.

"This," said Anita; "I saw Malo with one of these. He killed an unwilling worker on the ship."

It was a small globe, with a single barrel muzzle, and a white metal handle. The firing mechanism was almost obvious. It was a bolt from such a weapon as this, doubtless, that had killed Shac and Dud Ardley, in that cellar corridor of Great-New York.

"I'll take a look around," Snap said suddenly. "Suppose we're being followed? Give me that weapon."

There was vegetation partly over us, so that the sky was half obscured. Snap took the weapon, and like a monkey, swaying precariously, he ran and leaped among the upper branches, crashing his way until he could see back toward the horizon beyond which lay the city of Wor.

We heard his voice. "All clear. Nothing in sight. You coming up? Better get started."

"In a minute," I called.

Venus and Anita had the mechanisms spread on the broad limb-surface. They identified another by the multiple barrels around the little disk. It was the gravity ray in a very small head form. The operation seemed less obvious than the other; there were several tiny levers and protuberances.

"We can experiment," I said. There were two of these devices. "One for Snap, one for me. You girls can cling to us."

I put the gravity projectors in my pocket. There was also another of the electronic bolt weapons. Snap had one now in the branches over us. I was examining this second one, when suddenly there came Snap's call.

"Gregg! Come out of there!"

We heard the hiss, and saw the flash of his bolt.

Anita swung at me. "Gregg! Look!"

I followed her gesture. And then I knew why this forest was untenanted by humans!

CHAPTER XVII

The Things in the Dark Forest

UNTENANTED forest? Why, I saw it alive with living things! Here in the dark they had been crawling upon us. Every leafy branch of this tree-top tangle had something staring at us; the darkness was suddenly glowing with a myriad little green torches which were their eyes! They winked on all in an instant, as though at a signal, or at the sound of Snap's shout and the hiss of his bolt.

Insects! I suppose I should call them that. With my quick look I saw that they were of many sizes and shapes; tiny little things with eyes like lanterns; things of many legs, finger-length, hand-length, and some as long as my forearm. Brown-shelled things, with eyes glowing on stems. . . . There was one quite near us. A smooth, brown-shelled body; a round head on top, as big as my fist. Tumultuous horror swept me in that second of realization. These things had heads like little distended brains!

What horrible jest of nature was this! Dark forest recesses here, alive with crawling things, embryonically human! Miniatures of the Wandl workers, crawling here, unable to stand erect, groping with little pincers. And miniature brains with naked, shriveled bodies. . . .

It seemed that the eyes of that little brain were fixed on me with a baleful green glare in the darkness. But it was more than that. Suddenly I felt that here was something of infinite horror: little brains with reason gone from them. Minds which might have been human, save that the guiding force which every living thing should have was missing. What tortured little thoughts must be struggling here behind these gleaming green eyes! Crawling things fashioned in miniature in the pattern of this world's humans! But things irrational; not even normal insects! Outlawed! What a grim quirk of nature was this!

IT was an instant rush of thoughts. Anita and Venus were foundering to their feet in horror. They all but slipped from the limb. The weapons and devices we had ranged there slid off and went down into the darkness unheeded. From above us came Snap's horrified shouts and the hiss of his bolts.

"Here!" I gasped. "My hand—Anita, jump! Venus—quickly—"

I shoved Anita upward. The little eyes were suddenly all in movement, advancing upon us. Anita foundered, fluttered, got into the air and mounted toward Snap. Again Venus slipped off the limb. I lunged and drew her up. Green eyes nearest us came swooping. I did not dare fire a bolt; it was too close to Venus. I flung the

entire weapon at the green eyes, but I missed.

The little thing bit Vesta's arm. She screamed. Her flailing hand hit the tiny distended head. Its hideous little scream mingled with hers. It floated downward, snubbed and purple-red with gushing blood.

I struggled upward with the inert form of Vesta under one arm. Anita was mounting, free. Soap came lunging down.

"Fired every bolt in the damn weapon!" He saw the unconscious Vesta. "Good God, Gregg!"

Never have I heard such anguish as in his tone. "Gregg, she isn't—"

"One of them bit her. Help me."

We floundered up with her, a hundred feet above the tree-tops of that horrible forest—two hundred. The little lanterns of eyes down there had all winked out. The open starlight was over us.

Anita came swimming. "Oh Gregg! Is she—dead?"

Soap and I bore her, swimming with one arm free. Anita clung to Vesta's shoulder, murmuring frantically to her. Like swimmers in distress we bore our burden slowly forward over the matted tangle of the grisly forest.

Then Vesta stirred. We heard her murmur:

"This is—all right."

SHE had fainted with the shock of horror. It seemed nothing more; but I found her upper arm swelling. She tried to bend her body and sit up, but it threw us all out of balance.

"Lie straight," Soap murmured. "Oh, Vesta, dear—are you all right now?"

"Yes. Why not?"

And suddenly she laughed. It sent a shuddering chill over me. Good God! That eery sound to her laughter!

"What's the fuss about? I feel fine. Let's get away from here; somebody will be coming."

She was swimming now and we let her loose, but stayed close by her. I did not see Soap's face; he said nothing nor did I. But from the depths of my heart I prayed that Vesta would never laugh like that again.

We flew with our swimming stroke another mile—or two miles? Distance could not be judged. The reddish firmament was like an inverted bowl. The curving World surface gave us a narrow little vista—the forest rolling up from the horizon in front. Then we saw where the forest seemed to end. Water was beyond it; a ribbon like a broad river, and beyond that, frowning mountains, terraced and spired with jagged peaks.

Soap and I suddenly recalled the gravity ray projectors. We tried them; found that they would fling little beams of two varieties. Pencil-points of radiance, it seemed with an effective range of no more than a few hundred feet.

I let myself drift downward, experimenting. The tiny beam struck the forest-top. I felt the projector pulling violently downward in my hand. I clung to it. I was being drawn swiftly down by the attractive gravity force of the ray. The forest rose rapidly under me; I was all but flung upon it before I could find the other controls.

Then the ray altered its nature. The projector in my hand pulled me steadily up. But after a few hundred feet, I felt I was mounting only of my own momentum, with gravity and air-friction retarding me.

SNAP had tried similar experiments. We rejoined the swimming girls. I stared into Vesta's face; it was pale, but she did not seem distressed. She winked at me, with her familiar flippancy.

"How's your arm, Vesta?"

"It hurts, but I guess it's all right."

I turned to Soap. "I guess we can work these things. Get Vesta to cling to you."

Our progress now was far different, faster and with much less effort than before. Vaun clung to Soap's ankles and Anita to mine. We drifted close to the forest. With the repelling rays directed diagonally downward we had a strong upward and forward thrust. It carried us up about a thousand feet, and forward fully that much, in the arc of a circle. And as we came down, the process was repeated.

In this fashion, lying stiffly in the air, we went forward with great thousand-foot bounds. The forest rolled back under us. We came over the gleaming river. It seemed several miles broad; it extended from left to right; and as, with one of our descending leaps, we were momentarily within a hundred feet of its surface, I saw that it had a swift current.

Soap and Vaun were somewhat behind me. It was impossible now for us to keep together. As Anita and I swung up, with my ray striking down against the river surface, I saw moonlight upon the mountains ahead. The darkness had, for several minutes been paling. The stars were swinging, though with our bounds their movement was not apparent.

Now day suddenly burst upon us. The sun—smaller than on Earth—mounted swiftly up. It was a flat-topped, distorted, dull-red disk, blurred by the strange Wandl atmosphere.

We were in a dim red daylight. Anita twitched at my ankles.

"Look back of us!"

We were going up. Vaun and Soap, behind us, were in a descending arc. Above them, far back in the direction from which we had come, up against the reddish day sky, two blobs were visible.

PURSUIT! It seemed so. The blobs went down, but came up again, traveling with rays, like ourselves.

I shouted at Soap. "Someone after us! Two figures back there! Get them!"

His answering voice came. "Ormy! Ormy! Help!"

My gaze had been on the distant figures. I saw now that at the bottom of his arc, and starting upward again, Soap had lost Vaun! The impulse of his ray had twitched his ankles from her grasp; or she had let loose. He was hardly a hundred feet above the river; and Vaun, with acceleration downward unchecked, was falling into it.

"Ormy, help! Vaun, swim up!" His frenzied call reached me as I used the attraction ray and Anita and I whirled over and lunged downward.

"Ormy, help! Vaun! Vaun, look, use your arms! Swim!"

She was lying inert, making no effort to keep from falling! Her body, turned slowly, and over and struck the swiftly flowing river surface—but did not sink into the water! Instead, she half emerged, came up and lay in a crumpled heap; and with its rapid current, the river carried her away.

It was several minutes before Anita and I could maneuver to reach Vaun. Soap was already there, floundering on the water, awkwardly counteracting his balance, bending over Vaun. She was unconscious. Soap's white, agonized face stared at us as we dropped down, struck the river surface and scrambled toward him.

"Ormy, she's unconscious! Fainted again! Oh, what's the matter with her?"

The bite of those horrible insects! The thought of it turned me cold.

The river surface was like a very soft rubber mattress. The water clung to us, wet us; we could not kneel or stand erect; but sitting or lying down only a few inches of our bodies were submerged. We floated like corks, so light were we, and so little water did we displace.

"Veam, dear!" Soap raised her up, and I helped. We struggled with her across the yielding, glassy river surface. She had fallen near the further shore. Rocks, crags and strewn boulders were passing as the current swept us along at a speed of about ten miles an hour. She lay so impassive in our arms, with eyes closed, her face pallid but calm. She seemed to breathe normally—rapidly; but that, on Wandl, was normal.

WE landed on the rocky shore. It was still daylight. The blurred sun was swinging across the zenith so swiftly that its movement was visible. Wandl had been suddenly endowed with axial rotation! Even in these few minutes the brief day was past its noon. On the distant mountain-peaks looming above the nearby horizon, it seemed that the gloom of coming night was mingled with the red sunlight.

Anita and Soap laid Veam on the rocks. I suddenly remembered the two blobs in the sky behind us, which had seemed to be following. I stood gazing across the river. The red sky there seemed empty.

"She's reviving! Thank God, she's reviving!" Soap called at me, and I joined them. Veam was stirring. Color was coming into her cheeks; her lips were murmuring, as though she were talking in her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes. Her gaze fixed on us, as we bent over her.

A horrible, breathless moment; I think I have never experienced such breathless horror as in that moment while we waited for her to recognize us, and to speak.

"Why, what's the matter? Where are we? I thought we were in the tree-tops. Soap, don't look at me like that, dear! I'm all right—only confused."

She could remember nothing since the horror of the tree-tops when that grotesque thing struck and bit into her arm. But the attack of its poison in her veins seemed definitely over. We sat with her, soothing her, explaining what had happened; and she was wholly rational. Her strength came back; her mind cleared, save for that vacant interval when within her veins there was the fight against the poison.

The brief red day came to its close. The sun plunged below the horizon. The stars winked into being. The red-purple Wandl sight again was here. And now we saw that the whole firmament was swinging—the rotation made visible.

The darkness leaped around us. Shadows filled the rock hollows. The caves and recesses of this rocky shore turned black with darkness. And in the sky now we saw another of those familiar opalescent beams. This was the one from Mars; we could identify the red disk of the planet. The light-beam which Wandl had planted upon it streamed now across our firmament.

And then, from the mountains ahead of us but still below our horizon, the Wandl control station shot its attacking beam upward. Again there was that conflict in the sky. The axis of Mars was being altered; its rotation slowed.

A moment of the conflict passed. We could see now that we were much nearer than before to the control station. It seemed perhaps only twenty or thirty miles ahead of us in those mountains. The scream from it was deafening.

The Wandl beam died presently; the electrical scream from the control station was stilled.

The Earth's axis had been altered. Now Mars; and next would be Venus. A few more of these gravitational attacks, and then the helpless planets, with rotation checked, would be towed away by Wandl, out into the deadly cold of interstellar space!

Anita abruptly gave a startled outcry. The four of us, sitting in a group, had no time to rise. From be-

hind a dark crag nearby, two figures appeared. The starlight showed them clearly.

Molo and Wyk! They leaped forward at us!

CHAPTER XVIII

Strange, Weird Combat

WE were unarmed. I had flung my weapon at the thing in the forest; and Soup had exhausted all his bolts firing at the multitude of green eyes. Molo and Wyk came with a dive through the air; two tiny flashes leaped from them to the rocks behind them, and flung them forward.

Soup and I seized Vena and Anita. It was a second of confusion; then I saw we would not be able to rise in time. The diving, oncoming figures were no more than twenty feet away.

I heard my voice, rising above Soup's confused shouts.

"Protect Vena! Soup, get her behind you!"

A bolt could strike us—that instant, I felt, would be our last. Soup shoved Vena behind him; I got myself in front of Anita. We had almost gained our feet. I tried to thrust Anita and myself violently upward. We rose, but only a few feet; and then we were struck by the oncoming body of Wyk, like a huge, light-shelled three-pound insect leaping in mid-air against us. The two longest tentacle-arms wrapped around us. Anita twisted and kicked. The grotesque, goggling face of Wyk thrust itself almost into mine. The hollow voice panted:

"I—have you—last."

One of my arms was free and I struck with my fist at the gaping, upended mouth. Ghastly blow! It made my senses reel, as though the blow had been at me and not at that brown-shelled face! There was a crack. My fist sank through the shell. A cold, sticky ooze spurted out. Noisome! Horrible!

Wyk screamed. It ended with a rattle in his chest. His encircling arms fell away. The grisly smashed face was white with ooze and pulp where my fist had gone in.

We had sunk back to the rocks. I kicked the dead body of Wyk away.

"Anita! Swim up!"

"No!"

Sinking beside us were the falling bodies of Molo, Soup and Vena—drifting down; they seemed all intermingled. Soup was shouting:

"No, you don't! Drop that! What you trying—"

I LEAPED for them. Something long and thin and glowing was dangling from Molo's hand. He broke loose from the struggling Soup and Vena; his feet struck the rocks, and he shoved himself backward. My leap had carried me too high. I went over him by ten feet. I saw that in his hand was a six-foot length of glowing wire. He whirled it. The weight on its end described an arc, and then he flung the handle. The weighted wire struck Vena and Soup just as their repulsive ray shot down against the rocks and shoved them upward. The whirling wire wrapped itself around them. It stuck to them; bound them together. Its glow vanished. Soup had been shouting, "Gregg, come up! Gregg!" But it died in his throat.

All this while I, in those few seconds, was vaulting over Molo, trying to get back to the ground to leap again. I saw that Anita was crawling on the rocks. My gravity cylinder was at my belt; I had jammed it there to leave my hands free just as Wyk struck us.

I saw that Soup and Vena, wrapped together by the wire, had dropped their gravity projector. Their entwined figures went up forty or fifty feet, stopped, and began drifting down.

Molo was shouting, "Yes, Gregg Haljan! Now for you!"

I struck the rocks and fell twenty feet beyond him. This strange fight-

ing! It was so new to me, so confusing! I jerked out my gravity projector, but I did not know what I wanted to do with it. And in that second of indecision, I saw that the standing Molo was aiming at me! Directly over my head the inert bound bodies of Vesta and Soap were falling.

A flash leaped over the dark rocks from Molo! There was a split-second when I thought it was the end of me. But I was still alive. The bodies of Vesta and Soap struck my head and shoulders; knocked me down. I felt Molo's ray upon me. Not death, but only his gravity ray, like a giant hand pulling me. Apparently he did not dare kill us, but wanted us alive. I was scrambling on the rocks, entangled with Vesta and Soap. Molo's radiance clung. All three of us went tumbling forward toward him. I flashed my own ray, but I was rolling end over end, and it went wild. I dropped it; saw Molo's beam vanish; saw his upright standing figure towering above me.

Soap, Vesta and I were in a heap at his feet; he leaned down and seized me.

"Now, Gregg Haljan, I will teach you not to try escaping like this!"

NORMALITY again! With the huge, muscular Martian gripping me, his fist striking for my face, but missing and hitting my shoulder, —this was a blessed semblance of normality! I could understand fighting like this. I wrapped my legs around him; my fingers reached for his brawny throat as he kicked us into the air free of the entangling bodies of Soap and Vesta.

We rose a few feet and sank back, gripping each other, lunging and striking. He was very powerful, this Martian. I caught the round pillar of his throat with my hands. For an instant I shut off his wind, but I could not hold the grip. He struck me a glancing blow in the face, then the heel of his hand was under my chin. It forced back my head; broke my hold on his throat. With recovering breath, he gasped an imprecation. And I heard his exulting words: "You—are not strong enough!"

We rolled and bumped over the rocks. I caught a blow from his fist full in my face. It was almost the end. I felt my strength going. He laughed as he struck away my answering swing. I was on my back against the rocks, with his body on top of me. Then beyond and behind his hulking shoulder, silhouetted against the sky, I saw Anita rise up. She was lifting a boulder, a jagged grey mass of stone, full four feet in diameter. She poised it on her head; then crashed it down on Molo's head! He sank away from me. His arms relaxed. The boulder fell beside him.

Strange, weird combat! But it was over now. Wyk was dead; his gruesome body with its smashed face lay near us. Molo was unconscious; breathing heavily, lying motionless, with a wound on the back of his head, the blood welling out, matting his hair.

Anita and I were uninjured. Victorious—but what a hollow victory! On the rocks here, bound together by that strange wire, Soap and Vesta lay inert. We bent over them. The wire was cold to the touch now. It resisted our efforts to untwine it. We pulled frantically, and frantically we pleaded!

"Soap, speak to us! Vesta, can't you speak?"

THEIR eyes were open. I was aware that there was no starlight above us now, but instead a lurid sky of flying clouds, shot with a greenish cast. The darkness here was lurid green. The glow of it struck upon the wide-open staring eyes of Vesta and Soap. It seemed that there was intelligence in those eyes!

"Soap! Soap, old man, can't you hear us?"

His eyelids came down and up

again. Slowly, as though by a horrible effort.

"Can you understand me, Soap?"

Again he moved the eyelids closed and open. Was it "yes" for his answer?

"Can you move, Soap? Try. See if you can."

His right eyelid moved. Was that his answer: "No."

Anita and I had never felt so horrible a sense of disaster as that which swept us in those succeeding minutes. Soap and Vesta helpless; their bodies here; their minds here—yet with this inscrutable barrier between us.

Alone on this strange, weird planet. A breeze was springing up in the lurid green night. It came from the mountains; it wafted across the nearby river, rippling the surface, which was now green and sullen. We did not know where to go, what to do.

We found at last that we could untwist the stiffly clinging wire. We held Vesta and Soap on the rocks side by side, thirty or forty feet back from the river. The glowing wire had burned their clothes only a little, as its current was absorbed by the contact with their bodies.

"Soap, are you in pain?"

His eyelid moving, gave the answer. "No."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"No."

His tortured eyes seemed trying so hard to talk to me! Anita rose from Vesta and hung on my wrist.

"Oh, Gregg, what shall we do? Can't we help them? Take them—carry them?"

BUT where? To what purpose? Wild thoughts thronged me: Wandl's control station, bringing doom and death upon Earth, Mars and Venus. What was that now to me? I thought of Malo's ship—the Star-Streak. If only we knew where it was! I thought perhaps I might be able to understand its operation, be able to navigate it. Alone? I did not dare think how futile such an attempt would be.

"Anita—if we can get to the Star-Streak—seize it and escape from this world. . . ."

"Carry Soap and Vesta there now? But we don't know where it is! If we did—"

"If we could find it; escape from this world. . . ." Hush, hopeless repetition! Then I realized that Malo knew exactly where his vessel was located.

"We can make Malo lead us! Our only way to escape—to use his ship."

But Malo lay unconscious. I could not rouse him. I shook him, gently; then roughly. I pleaded frantically. It was useless.

Anita and I were so alone! We clung together.

"Gregg—this wind! Look at that sky!"

The mounting wind was tugging at us. It whined through the dark mountain defiles; surged out over the river, where the water now was beginning to toss with waves crossing the swift current. The sky was shot with lurid green shafts of radiance. Over us, the lowering leaden clouds were scudding, riding the wind.

Weird, unearthly storm! It burst now upon us. I found suddenly that Anita and I were bracing against it. A puff dislodged us, so that we were blown a dozen feet, bringing up against a crag, as though we were balloons, swept by a gust.

"Anita—this wind—we can't maintain ourselves here. We've—"

HORROR checked me: the thought of Vesta and Soap, lying there on the rocks. And abruptly we saw the body of Wyk, like a great dried insect, lifted by the wind, whirled like a brown leaf over and over, and carried away.

Then a little pebble came bowling

had struck me. Then a rain of pebbles, like bullets, pelting at me.*

I shouted above the wind and the clatter of the pebbles.

"Hold to me! We'll have to use the gravity ray; get to Venn and Soap."

Fantastic storm! We found we did not dare trust ourselves to the gravity ray. We lay prone, pulling ourselves back toward Venn and Soap. Then it seemed for a moment the gusts were less violent. We reached the solid, inert forms, where they had blown into a niche between two boulders.

"Can't stay here, Anita."

"No! If it begins again—"

"Over there! A cave!"

It seemed a little cave opening. We got Venn and Soap into it, just as another gust came, with a rain of dirt and loose stones pelting past outside.

I suddenly thought of Malo!

"Anita, you stay here! Got to get Malo!"

"Gregg, no!"

"I must! If we could bring him to consciousness, make him tell us where the *Star-Streak* is—"

I flung off her restraining hold. The wind eased up. I leaped out into it, swimming. The rocks slid by close under me in a swift sidewise drift. In a moment I would be carried out over the river. It was a chaos of green, windswept darkness. But there was bursting light now overhead and rumbling claps, like thunder.

I SAW Malo's body where the wind held him pinned against the side of a flat ten-foot rock butte; and dove for him, swimming down frantically until I struck against the rock with a blow that almost knocked the breath from me. Malo was still obviously unconscious.

How long it took me to get back to Anita, floundering with Malo's body, I do not know. I managed to keep against the ground; was blown back, and struggled forward again. The wind came with strange pulls. In one of the lulls I hauled Malo through the air and into the cave. I leaped in after him.

"Gregg!" Anita held to me, her arms around me. "Gregg, dear, you were gone so long."

I was battered and bruised and breathless. The cave's mouth was like a ten-foot tunnel leading downward into blackness.

"Gregg, I put Venn and Soap here."

They laid side by side, like two dead bodies, here in the greenish darkness. We found Malo, laid him with them. Together we crouched beside them, clinging to each other, listening to the wild sweep of the wind outside. The storm had burst into its full fury now. It would whirl us away like feathers, outside there now. The lightning and thunder hissed and crashed. Stones and boulders were being flung like bullets.

This flimsy, weightless world! It seemed as though the rocks within on which we were crouching would be shifted and carried away.

"Gregg! Gregg, dear, is this the end of us?"

I thought so. A mass of rock fell at the opening, closing it, so that we were buried here in the darkness.

"Anita, dear—if this is the end—of this life, I will love you always."

Darkness, with her arms around me

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* The storm was probably caused by the axial rotation of Wandl. The light-beam upon Earth had been attacked by the Wandl control station without axial rotation; but to attack the beam from Mars, a manipulation of Wandl was necessary. The planet's rotation was started, and suddenly checked. It remained night now, here in this hemisphere. Perhaps there were natural storm tendencies here; perhaps the operators of the control station were unduly eager, manipulating the rotation too suddenly. At all events, this wind, unusual, almost unprecedented on Wandl, did considerable damage everywhere.

and a shuddering world outside. But here, only Anita and her soft arms.

"Gregg! Gregg, dear! Gregg!"

Horror was in her voice! Then I saw what she was seeing. It was not just Anita and I buried here in the darkness with the bodies of Soap and Vesta and Mole. Something else was here!

From the blackness of the cave, two green, glowing eyes were staring. Their radiance showed me the outlines of a distended head. An insane thing? But it was not another of the forest insects. This seemed to be an animal. The glow of its distended head disclosed a lithe, horizontal body, seemingly solid and muscled.

A clattering, insane animal, here in the dark with us! We heard mumbling, mumbling words, and an eery, cackling laugh as it came padding forward!

(Concluded next month)

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An Exciting Story

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The Conclusion of the Current Novel

By Ray Cummings

—And Others!

The Great Dome on Mercury

By Arthur L. Zagat

DARL THOMAS mopped the streams of perspiration from his bronzed face and lean-flanked, wiry body, made naught save for clinging shorts and fiber sandals. "By the whirling rings of Saturn," he growled as he gazed disconsolately at his paper-strewn desk, "I'd like to have those directors of ITA here on Mercury for just one Earth-month. I'll bet they wouldn't be so particular about their quarterly reports after they'd executed a

Trapped in the great Dome, Darl valiantly defends Earth's outpost against the hirelings of Mars and his horde of pigmy henchmen.

half-ton or so of fat off their greasy bellies. 'Fuel consumption per man-hour.' Now what in blazes does that mean? Hey, Jim!" He twiveled his chair around to the carried book of gauge-dials that was Jim Holcomb's special charge, then sprang to his feet with a startled, "What's the matter?"

The cheeky, red-haired control-man was tugging at a lever, his muscles bulging on arms and back, his face white-drawn and tense. "Look!" he gritted, and jerked a grim jaw at one of the dials. The long needle was moving rapidly to the right. "I can't hold the air pressure!"

"Wow, what a leak!" Darl started forward. "How's it below, in the mine?"

"Normal. It's the Dome air that's going!"

"Shoot on the smoke and I'll spot the hole. Quick, man!"

"Okay!"

Thomas' long legs shot him out of the headquarters tent. Just beyond the entrance flap was one of the two gyrocopters used for flying within the Dome. He leaped into the cockpit and drove home the starter-piston. The flier buzzed straight up, shooting for the misted roof.

THE Earthman fought to steady his craft against the hurricane wind, while his gray eyes swept the three-mile circle of the vault's base. He paled as he noted the fierce speed with which the white smoke-jets were being torn from the pipe provided for just such emergencies. His glance followed the terrific rush of the vapor. Big as a man's head, a hole glared high up on the Dome's inner surface. Feathered wisps of tell-tale vapor whisked through it at blurring speed.

"God, but the air's going fast," Darl groaned. The accident he had feared through all the months he had captained Earth's outpost on Mercury had come at last. The Dome's shell was pierced! A half-mile high, a mile across its circling base, the great inverted bowl was all that made it possible for men to defy the white hell of Mercury's surface. Outside was an airless vacuum, a waste quivering under the heat of a sun thrice the size it appears from Earth. The silvered exterior of the hemisphere shot back the terrific blaze; its quartz-covered network of latticed steel inclosed the air that all beings need to sustain life.

Darl tugged desperately at the control-stick, thrust the throttle over full measure. A little more of this swift outrush and the precious air would be gone. He caught a glimpse of the Dome floor beneath him and the shaft-door that gave entrance to the mine below. Down there, in underground tunnels whose steel-armored end-walls cowered the Dome's protection below the surface, a horde of friendly Venusians were laboring. If the leak were not stopped in a few minutes that shaft door would blow in, and the mine air would whisk through the hole in its turn. Only the Dome would remain, a vast, rounded sepulcher, hiding beneath its curve the dead bodies of three Earthmen and the silent forms of their Venusian charges.

DARL'S great chest labored as he strove to reach the danger spot. Invisible fingers seemed to be clamped about his throat. His eyes blurred. The gyrocopter was sluggish, dipped alarmingly when it should have darted, arrow-like, to its mark. With clenched teeth, the Terrestrian forced the whirling lifting vanes to the limit of their power. They bit into the fast thinning air with a muffled whine, raised the ship by feet that should have been yards.

By sheer will he forced his oxygen-starved faculties to function, and realized that he had reached the wall. He was drifting downward, the hole draining the Dorsal's air was five feet above him, beyond his reach. The driven vanes were powerless to stem the craft's fall.

One wing-tip scraped interlaced steel, a horizontal girder, part of the vault's mighty skeleton. Dorl crawled along the wing, dragging with him a sheet of flexible quartzite. The metal fell tugged under him and slanted downward, trying like some animate thing to rid itself of the unwanted burden. He clutched the beam, hung by one leg and one arm as his craft slid out from beneath him. The void below dragged at him. He put forth a last tremendous spurt of effort.

Two thousand feet below, Jim Holcomb, dizzy and gasping, manipulated the controls frantically, his eyes fastened on the dropping pressure-gauge. From somewhere outside the tent a dull thud sounded. "Crashed! Dorl's crashed! It's all over!" Hope gone, only the instinct of duty held him to his post. But the gauge needle quivered, ceased its steady fall and began a slow rise. Jim stared uncomprehendingly at the dial, then, as the fact seeped in, staggered to the entrance. "That's better, a lot better," he exclaimed. "But, damn it, what was that crash?"

THE headquarters tent was at one edge of the circular plain. Jim's bleary eyes followed the springing arch of a vertical girder, up and up, to where it curved inward to the space ship landing lock that hung suspended from the center of the vaulted roof. Within that bulge, at the very apex, was the little conning-tower, with its peri-telescope, its arsenal of ray-guns and its huge beam-thrower that was the Dorsal's only means of defense against an attack from space. Jim's gaze flickered down again, wandered across the brown plain, past the long rows of canvas barracks and the derrick-like shaft-head. Head by the further wall a crumpled white heap lay huddled.

"My God! It was his plane!" The burly Earthman sobbed as his ten-foot leaps carried him toward the wreck.

Dorl was his friend as well as Chief, and together they had served the Interplanetary Trading Association, ITA, for years, working and fighting together in the wilds of the outer worlds. A thought struck him, even as he ran. "What in th' name o' Jupiter's nine moons stopped th' leak?" He glanced up, halted, his mouth open in amazement. "Well, I'm a four-tailed, horn-headed Plutonian if there ain't th' boy himself!"

Far up in the interlaced steel of the framework, so high that to his staring comrade he seemed a naked doll, Dorl stood outstretched on a level beam, his tiny arms holding a minute square against the wall. Lucky it was that he was so tall and his arms so long. For the saving plate just lapped the upper rim of the hole, and stemmed the fierce current by only a half-inch margin.

THE throbbing atmosphere machine in the sub-surface engine-room was replacing the lost air rapidly, and now the increasing pressure was strong enough to hold the translucent sheet against the wall by its own force. Jim saw the extended arms drop away. The machine waved down to him, then turned to the shell again, as if to examine the emergency repair. For a moment Dorl stood there, then he was running along the girder, was climbing, ape-like, along a latticed beam that curved up and in, to

swing down and merge with the bulge of the air-lock's wall.

"Like a bloomin' monkey! Can't he wait till I get him down with th' spare plane?"

But Darl wasn't thinking of coming down. Something he had seen through the translucent repair sheet was sending him to the look-out tower within the air-lock. Head over head he swung, tiny above that vast immensity of space. In his forehead a pulse still jumped as his heart hurried new oxygen to thirsty cells. He held his gaze steadily to the roof. A moment's vertigo, a grip missed by the sixteenth of an inch, the slightest failure in the perfect team-play of eye and brain, and rippling muscle, and he would crash, a half-mile beneath, against hard rock.

At last he reached the curving side of the landing lock. But the platform at the manhole entrance jutted diagonally below him, fifteen feet down and twelve along the bellying curve. Darl measured the angle with a glance as he hung outstretched, then his body became a human pendulum over the sheer void. Back and forth, back and forth he swung, then, suddenly, his grasp loosened and a white arc flashed through the air.

Breathless, Jim saw the far-off figure flick across the chasm toward the jutting platform. He saw Darl strike its edge, bit his lip as his friend teetered on the rim and swayed slowly outward. Then Darl found his balance. An imperative gesture sent the watcher back to his post, his sorrel-topped head shaking slowly in wonderment.

DARL THOMAS ran headlong up the staircase that spiralled through the dim cavern. "No mistake about it," he muttered. "I saw something moving outside that hole. Two little leaks before, and now this big one. There's something a lot off-color going on around here."

Quickly he reached the little room at the summit. He flung the covers over from the peri-telescope screen. Tempered by filters as it was, the blaze of light from outside hit him like a physical blow. He adjusted the aperture and beat eagerly over the view-table.

Vacation jaunts and travel view-casts have made the moon's landscape familiar to all. Very similar was the scene Darl scanned, save that the barren expanse, pitted and scarred like Luna's, glowed almost liquid under the beating flame of a giant sun that flared in a black sky. Soundless, airless, lifeless, the tumbled plain stretched to a jagged horizon.

The Earthman depressed the instrument's eye, and the silvered outside of the Dome, ablaze with intolerable light, swept on to the screen disk. The great mirror seemed alive with radiant heat as it shot back the sun's withering darts. The torrid temperature of the oven within, unendurable save to such veterans of the far planets as Darl and Jim Holcomb, was conveyed to it through the ground itself. The direct rays of the sun, nearer by fifty million miles than it is to Earth, would have blasted them, unprotected, to baked carbon in an eye-blink.

An exclamation burst from Darl. A half-inch from the Dome's blazing arc, a hundred yards in actuality, the screen showed a black fleck, moving across the waste! Darl quickly threw in the full-power lens, and the image leaped life-size across the table. The black fleck was the shadow of a space-suited figure that lumbered slowly through the viscous, clinging footing. How came this living form, clad in gleaming silver, out there in that blast-furnace heat? In one of the space suit's claw-like hands a tube flashed greenly.

DARL'S hand shot out to the trigger of the beam-thrower. Aimed by the telescope's adjustment, the ray that could disintegrate a giant space filer utterly flared out at his finger's pressure. Against the lambent brown a spot glowed red where the beam struck. But, warned by some uncanny prescience, the trespasser leaped aside in the instant between Thomas' thought and act. Before Darl could aim and fire again the foe had dodged back and was protected by the curve of the Dome itself.

Two white spots showed on either side of Darl's nostrils. His mouth was a thin white slit, his eyes gray marbles. Standing against the wall beside him was a space suit, mirror-surfaced and double-walled against the planet's heat. In a few moments he was encased within it, had snatched a pocket ray-gun from the long rack, and was through the door to the auxiliary air-lock. The air soughed out in response to his swift thrust at a lever, a second door opened, and he was on the outside, reeling from the blast of that inferno of light and heat.

For a moment the Earthman was dazzled, despite the smoked quartz eye-pieces in his helmet. Then, as his eyes grew used to the glare, he saw, far below, the erect figure of the stranger. The man was standing still, waiting. His immobility, the calm confidence with which he stood there, was insolently challenging. Darl's rage flared higher at the sight.

SCORNING the ladder that curved along the Dome to the ground, he threw himself at the polished round side of the great hemisphere. With increasing speed he slid downward, the gleaming surface breaking only slightly the velocity of his fall. On Earth this would have been suicidal. Even here, where the pull of gravity was so much less, the feat was insanely reckless. But the heat-softened ground, the strength of his metal suit, brought Darl safely through.

He whirled to meet the expected onslaught of the interloper. The green tube was aimed straight at him! The Earthman started to bring his own weapon up when something exploded in his brain. There was a moment of blackness; then he was again clear-minded. But he could not move—not so much as the tiny twist of his wrist that would have brought his own weapon into play.

Frozen by this strange paralysis, Darl Thomas saw the giant figure approach. The apparition bent and slung him to its shoulder. Glowing walls rose about him, dimmed. The Terrestrian knew that he was being carried down into one of the myriad openings that honeycombed the terrain. The luminescence died; there was no longer light enough to penetrate to his helmet's darkened goggles.

Frantic questions surged through the captured Earthman's mind. Who was his captor? From where, and how, had he come to Mercury? Jim, Angus McDermott, and himself were the only Terrestrians on the planet; of that he was certain. Only one or two of the reptile-skinned Venusian laborers had sufficient intelligence to manipulate a space suit, and they were unquestionably loyal.

This individual was a giant who towered far above Darl's own six feet. The Mercurian natives—he had seen them when ITA's expedition had cleaned out the burrows beneath the Dome and sealed them up—were midgets, the tallest not more than two feet in height. Whatever he was, why was the stranger trying to destroy the Dome? Apparently Thomas himself was not to be killed offhand: the jolting

journey was continuing interminably. With enforced patience the Earthman resigned himself to wait for the next scene in this strange drama.

IN the headquarters tent Jim's usual grin was absent as he moved restlessly among the switches and levers that concentrated control of all the Dome's complex machinery. "Darl's been gone a devilish long time," he muttered to himself. "Here it's almost time for shifts to change and he's not back yet."

A bell clanged, somewhere up in the mass of cables that rose from the control board. For the next ten minutes Holcomb had no time for worry as he rapidly manipulated the innumerable wheels and handles in accord with the vari-colored lights that flickered on a huge ground-glass map of the sub-Mercurian passages. On the plain outside there was a vast rustling, a many-voiced twittering and squeaking that was not quite bird-like in tone. Through the opened tent-flap one could see the stream of Venusian workers, their work-period ended, pouring out of the shaft-head and filing between the ordered ranks of others whose labors were about to begin.

They were queer-looking specimens, these gentle, willing allies of the Earthmen. Their home planet is a place of ever-clouded skies and constant torrential rains. And so the Venusians were amphibians, web-footed, fish-faced, their skin a green covering of horny scales that shed water and turned the sharp thorns of their native jungles. When intrepid explorers discovered in the mazes of Mercury's spongy interior the earth that was so badly needed as a base material for synthetic food to supply Earth's famine-threatened population, it was to these loyal and amiable beings that ITA's engineers turned for workers who could endure the stifling heat of the underground workings.

The tent-flap was thrust aside, and a hawk-nosed Scot came sleepily in, to be enthusiastically greeted by Jim.

"Hello, you old Caledonian. 'Bout time you showed up."

THE newcomer fixed the speaker with a dour gaze. "An' why should I commence my tour o' dooty befair the time?"

"Because your chief, Mr. Darl Thomas, decided that he's a Silliloo bird or somethin', flew to his little nest up top, an' forgot to come down again."

"Is this sin o' your jests, James Holcomb? I enquire mairly that I may ken when to laugh."

"It's no joke, Mac. Last I see o' him he's skippin' around the roof like he has a burnin' propeller stuck to his shoulder blades. He lights on th' air-lock platform, pops inside, an' goes dead for all I know."

From his bony legs to his scrawny neck the Scotchman's angular body, as nearly nude as that of the others, radiated the doubt that was expressed in every seam and wrinkle of his hatchet face.

"That's straight, Angus, may I kiss a pink-eared vamp if it ain't. Here's what happened." The bantering grin disappeared from Jim's countenance as he detailed the events that had preceded Darl's vanishing. "That was two hours ago," he concluded, "and I've been getting pretty uneasy about him."

"Why did na ye call me, so that ain o' us micht eenvestigate?".

"Hell, Darl wasn't born yesterday, he can take care of himself. Besides, your last shift was pretty strenuous, an' I thought I'd let you sleep. No tellin' what might happen next; this forsaken place has been givin' me the jim-jams lately."

"Your consecederation is touching, but—" A scratching at the door, accompanied by a high squeak, interrupted him.

TO Jim's shouted "Come in," there entered a Venusian, whose red rosette fastened to the green scales of his skin marked him an overseer. In the thread-like fingers of his hand he held a time-sheet, but the nervous pulsing of his gill-membranes caused Holcomb to exclaim anxiously: "What's wrong, Ran-los? No accident, I hope?"

The shrill combination of squeaks and twitterings that came from the man-reptile's toothless mouth meant nothing to the Scot, but Jim's last service had been on Venus and he had gained a working knowledge of the language. Finally the interchange was ended, and Ran-los bowed himself out. Jim turned to his companion.

"There's some more queer stuff for you, Angie. Just before shift-change, Ran-los heard odd sounds from the other side of the barrier at the end of gallery M-39. Says they seemed like signals o' some kind. He's a wise old bird and if he's worried about something it's damn well worth lookin' into. I don't know whether to find out first what's happened to Darl, or—"

Again there was an interruption, this time from the usually silent radio-communication set in the far corner. Jim leaped to the instrument and snapped on the head-set. Angus leaned over him, watching his intent face.

Faintly, as from an immense distance, came the thin whistle of space-radio. "S-W-A . . . S-W-A . . . S-W-A. . . ." The general attention signal for all Earth's far-flung outposts from Jupiter to Mercury! The signal was coming from "M-I-T-A," the Earth company's home station on the Moon, outside the Heaviside layer. "S-W-A . . . S-W-A . . . M-I-T-A . . . M-I-T-A." Again the signal rose and fell.

JIM reached for the sending key and pounded out his acknowledgement: "K; M-E-R . . . K; M-E-R . . . K; M-E-R." He listened again, heard Venus answer, and Jupiter. Across five hundred million miles of space ITA men were responding to the roll-call of Earth. A reminiscent smile crossed Jim's face as he recognized the stuttering fist of Rade Perrin, on Eros. Rade always sent as if he were afraid the instrument would snap at his fingers.

M-I-T-A was signalling again, and now came the message: "S-W-A. All trading posts, mines and colonies are warned to prepare for possible attack. The Earth Government has just announced the receipt of an ultimatum from—" A raucous howl cut across the message and drowned it out. The siren blast howled on and on, mocking Jim's straining ears. "Well I'll be —Interference! Deliberate blanketing! The rats! The—" He blared into a torrent of profanity whose imaginativeness was matched only by its virulence.

Mac was clutching his shoulder, stirred for once out of his vaunted "deegnity." "What is it, mon, what is it?"

"War, you bloody Scotchman, war! That's what it is!"

"War! Poosh, man, 'tis impossible!"

"The hell it's impossible! Damn, and Darl not here! Take over, Mac; I've got to go up an' get him!"

IN the meantime Thomas' helpless journey had come to an end. After an interminable descent in what to him had been pitch darkness, the giant who was carrying him halted. Darl had heard the whistling inrush of air into some lock, then the clanging of a door.

He felt himself hurled to the ground. Fumbling hands tugged at him, drew off his space suit.

The dim light of the cavern, as the helmet was dragged from his head, hurt Darl's eyes. Salt sweat stung them. It was hot, hotter than the Dome, but as it was in the earth mine, where only the nerveless Venusians could work for any length of time.

Darl struggled to focus his eyes on a blurred blue form that towered above him. He felt sharp claws scratch at him and realized that cords were being passed around his limp body. They cut tightly into his legs and his arms. Then he was staring at a tube in the hand of his captor. Its end glowed with a brilliant purple light, and he felt a flood of renewakened energy warm him. His head jerked up, he strained against the taut, strong fibers binding him. The paralysis was gone, but he was still helpless.

A husky, rumbling voice broke the silence. "I wouldn't struggle, Earthman, if I were you. Even should you get free I still have my ray-tube. And my little friends would ask nothing better than your body to play with."

Darl writhed to a sitting posture. Now he could see his mysterious abductor clearly. This eight-foot, blue-feathered individual, with carved beak and beady eyes glittering from his naked, repulsively wrinkled head, was a Martian! Despite the human shape of his body, despite his jointed limbs and thumbed hands, this denizen of the red planet resembled a vulture far more than he did any other Earth creature.

THE Earthman's pride of race came to his rescue. "What's the game?" he growled. "Looking for trouble?" There was nothing in Darl's voice to show the fear that chilled him. Behind the Martian he could see vaguely a group of little yellow Mercurians.

"I'll ask all the questions here. And you'll answer them, too, if you're wise. Even your dull mind should comprehend that you are in my power."

Darl decided to proceed more cautiously. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I want," the Martian answered, "the recognition signal of Earth's space-ships."

"What!" The ejaculation burst from Darl's throat. This alien wanted the secret code, the watchword that distinguished Earth's space ships, that gained for them free admittance to ITA's armed posts on the outer planets! This could mean only one thing, that the long rivalry, the ancient dispute between Earth and Mars was about to flare into open war. Any friendly visit from a foreign flier would be heralded by word from M-I-T-A. Thomas' face became a stony mask, covering the tumult of his mind.

"You understood. I want the Earth recognition signal at once—and after that, the surrender of the Dome." The very calmness of the husky tones was a threat.

"Never!"

"I warn you, Darl Thomas. It would be the better part of wisdom for you to yield willingly what I ask. You will give in eventually, and the means of persuasion I shall use will not be exactly—pleasant."

"You'll get nothing from me!"

The outlander's lidless eyes were filmed with a gray membrane. His head thrust forward, the feathered ruff beneath it bristled. Darl braced himself to withstand the swooping pounce that seemed imminent, the slash of the sharp beak. A burring rattle broke the momentary hush. The Martian relaxed, turned to the Mercurian from whom the sound had come and replied with staccato vibrance.

AS the cave filled with a whirring tumult Darl had a chance to examine the Mercurian natives crowding around his prostrate body. They were little yellow midgets, ranging from eighteen inches to two feet in height. Half of their small stature was taken up by snouted heads, with saucer-like, crimson eyes, and long white tusks jutting from foam-flecked mouths. The trunks were globular. The spindling legs and thin arms ended in sharp claws. There was an impression of animal ferocity about these tiny beings that stamped them as utter savages.

His captor was speaking to the Earthman again, his horny beak parted in what might have been a grim smile. "My friends remind me that I promised you to them. They have not forgotten how you and your fellows drove them from their burrows."

Darl was suddenly cold, though the sweat still streamed from his bound body. An uncontrollable shudder took him as he saw what the diminutive claws of the midgets held. While the Dome was still an unfinished framework one of the Terrestrian artisans had somehow been isolated from his fellows. Thomas had been of the party that found what was left of him, and the memory was still a throbbing nightmare.

"Once more! Will you give me the recognition signal?"

Darl shook his head, and prayed for sudden death. The Martian spoke to the dwarfs. They started forward, saliva drooling from their tusks. Darl gritted his teeth. He would hold out as long as was humanly possible.

A shrill rhythmic whistle came from somewhere outside. The blue giant started and snapped something to the Mercurians. Then he turned to Darl. "I must leave you for a little while," he said. "You have till I return to change your mind." With a parting admonition to the savages he was gone through a side door that Thomas had not noticed before.

GRATEFUL for the postponement, however short, of the inescapable ordeal, Darl took stock of his situation. He lay, firmly bound, on the gritty rock floor of a low-ceiled cave about twelve feet square. In one wall was a door of red metal. The portal through which the Martian had vanished was next to it. Darl repressed an exclamation when he saw the opposite wall. It was of solid metal, bluishly iridescent. That was beryllium steel, the alloy from which the barriers at the terminals of the sorta mine were fashioned. He forced his head higher. There were the marks of the jointures, the welding that he himself had made.

The discovery seemed only to emphasize the helplessness of his predicament. His faithful Venusians, Rao-lon, Te-ira, and the rest were just on the other side of the three-inch plate of toughened steel. Three inches—yet it might have been as many hundred miles for all the help they could give him.

The yellow pigmies were circling in a macabre dance, their crimson eyes turned always toward him, hate glowing from their crawling depths. The whistle beyond changed in character. Darl recognized it. It was a Martian space-radio, the code of which Earth scientists had never been able to decipher. The Mercurian circle tightened, the fetid smell of the dwarfs was overpowering. Low at first, then louder and louder came the rattling cacophony of their chant. It filled the confined space with an overpowering clamor.

Darl writhed again, rolling over and over till he had reached the barrier. The pigmies gave way before him; evidently they had been

warned to keep their claws off. With his instep Thomas could reach the helmet of his space suit, where it had been dropped against the wall. He drove it against the metal and the clangor of its striking reverberated through the chamber. Darl managed to regulate the sound. He was now hammering out double knocks, long and short, spaced in the dots and dashes of the Morse code. "H-E-L-P D-A-R-L H-E-L-P D-A-R-L H-E-L-P. . . ."

It was like some scene out of a madman's dream, this dim-lit cavern with its circling, dancing pigmies, the human figure lying sidewise on the ground, the rattling, savage chant and the metallic tattoo of Darl's hopeless message. A diabolic orgy of weird sound and criss-crossing shadows.

IT seemed hours that he pounded the helmet against the wall, hoping that the sound of it would be audible above the clamor of the midgets. His knees and hips were aching and numb, his leg ripped almost to the bone by the sharp edges of the jagged floor. A sudden thought struck him. The fiber thongs that bound him were also rubbing against the rock. His flesh was terribly torn. Perhaps the thongs, too, had been frayed, weakened by the long continued friction.

He stopped the pounding signals and began to force his knees apart with all the power of his burly calves. The cords cut into his bulging muscles, cut into and through his skin. The veins stood out on his forehead, his neck was a corded pillar, his teeth bit through his lip as he stifled a scream of pain. Then, startlingly, the fibers snapped. His legs at least were free! He could fight, die fighting, and take these others with him into oblivion!

Darl leaped to his feet. Before the astounded natives realized what was up he was charging into their circle. A well aimed kick sent one crashing against the further wall. Another crunched against the rock. Then they were on him, a frothing wave of tiny furies. A score or more, they swarmed over him as a pack of African wild dogs swarms over a huge water-buffalo marked for the kill. Their claws scratched and tore, their sharp fangs stabbed into his flesh. His arms were still tightly bound to his sides, and he lashed out with his sandaled feet, swung his shoulders like battering rams, whirled in a dervish dance. Their brittle bones cracked under his hammer blows. They dropped from him like squashed flies. But, small as they were, he was terrifically outnumbered. By sheer weight of numbers they dragged him down, and piled on top of him as he lay, quivering and half-conscious, on the blood-soaked floor.

THROUGH the blackness that welled and burst in his brain, one thought held. He had fooled the Martians, for in another instant the enraged savages would kill him and the password to Earth's outposts would be safe. Already he felt their fangs at his throat.

A whirring rattle cut through the turmoil like a whip-lash, and the harp of pigmies swiftly scattered. The coco-bird from Mars was in the room. To Darl he was a blurred blueness from which glittered those two jet beads of eyes. As from a distance he heard a rumble, its meaning beating dully to him. "Not so easy, Thomas, not so easy. I want that signal, and by Tana, I'm going to have it."

The Earthman felt a current of cooler air. Instinctively he drew it into his lungs. It swept him up from the blackness that was closing in about him, brought him back to consciousness and despair. The chat-

tering Mercurians crowded round to commence their interrupted orgy. "For the last time, Earthman, will you talk?"

Darl shook his head weakly and closed his eyes. In a moment—

Suddenly there was a crash of metal on metal. Another! The clangor of falling steel. Now someone was shouting. "Darl, Darl, are you alive?" All about him were shrill twitterings, squeaking calls, squeals and scutterings. Darl's nostrils stung with the odor of burned flesh. A door slammed . . .

He opened his eyes on a confused riot, saw Jim crouched, flashing ray-gun in hand. There was a hole in the barrier, and a mob of green-scaled Venusians were crowding through. Jim's ray caught the last Mercurian and the dwarf vanished in a cloud of acrid, greasy smoke.

"Thank God you've come!" Darl managed to gasp. Then cool blackness closed around him.

DARL THOMAS lay on a cot in the headquarters tent, swathed from head to foot in an inch-thick wrapping of bandages. Jim's theory was that if one bandage was good, two were better, and he had cleaned out the post's slender stock. The red-haired Earthman was seated at the cot's side, watching the taciturn Scot operating the control board. He was telling Darl of the stirring message from M-I-T-A, and of the blanketing interference that marred the completion of the message.

"I didn't know what to do first," he continued, "whether to go down below and find out what Ras-los was battin' about, or shoot up to you in the conin' tower with the message. Like the thick-head I am, I picked the wrong thing. I sure got the gimmicks when I found the look-out empty, an' a space suit an' ray-gun gone." Jim grinned sheepishly. "I was runnin' around in circles. You were outside, God alone knows how long. Believe me, I had you crossed off the list! That left two of us. With a war on, somebody had to stand guard in the look-out, the control board here had to be watched, an' somebody else had to get below.

"I was just tryin' to figure out a way o' cuttin' myself in half when I thought o' Ras-los. For a Weenie he's got a heck of a lot of sense. I zoomed down, hauled him out o' his bunk, scooted back up, showed him how to work the peri-telescope an' the big beam-thrower, an' left him there on guard."

"Best thing you could have done." Darl's voice was muffled by the bandages in which his head, as well as the rest of his body, was swathed. "He's got a head on his shoulders, that bird."

"Somethin' told me to take a ray-gun down in the mine with me. I was just steppin' out o' the elevator when I caught your last signal; -L-P D-A-R-L was all I got, but it was enough. How you ever got the other side of the barrier had me wingin', but you were there right enough, and yellin' for help. Ras-los had been doin' some repairs on a head support an' his weldin' machine was still there. Takin' an awful chance on there bein' air on the other side, I butted it up against the wall, shot the flame against the steel, and when she was soft enough had some of the Weenies smash her in with sledge-hammers. First thing I see is you, stretched out in a pool o' blood, with a couple of those yellow imps just gettin' to work on you. I clipped them first—that gave the Martian a chance to get away. An' then—well, you know the rest."

"I OWE you one for that, Jim. Too bad, though, the big fellow escaped; we'll hear from him again, or I don't know the breed.

Wonder how he got on the planet."

"The sucker must 'a' stowed away on the last recruit ship from Venus, slipped in a case o' tools or somethin'. Mars has labor agents there, too, you know, for their farms on Ganymede."

"Possibly. He knew my name, and that I was chief here. He's rigged up an air-lock out there, though I can't figure out how he gets the air."

"That's easy. While I was repairin' the barrier I found a pipe runnin' through. He's been stealin' ours. Which, by the same token, is why he was punchin' holes in the Dome rather than down below, where he would have been safer from discovery."

"So that's it. Get anything more on the space-radio?"

"Nope. Angus has kept the earlaps on, but the other is still jammed. Hey, what're you up to?"

Darl was swinging his bandaged body up from the cot that had been set up in the headquarters tent at his insistence. "Can't lie on my back," he panted, "with that devil loose on the planet. Lord knows what he's up to now. We're short-handed enough as it is."

He rose to his feet, staggering with weakness and loss of blood. But his indomitable will drove him on. "I'll take over the control board. Send Angus up to relieve Ras-lon, and you get below and speed up production. Earth will need double quantities of suits for food, now that there's a war on."

JIM turned to convey the order to the Scot, but he whirled to the tent-flap instead as a riot of sound exploded outside. He tore aside the canvas, and now there was a burst of shrill, frightened Venusian cries and a deeper, rattling chorus. Out on the Dome floor, pouring from the shaft-head in a panic torrent, came the Venusians. And among them, leaping, slashing, dragging them down, were countless little yellow men, their fangs and tusks and curving claws crimson with the blood of their victims.

"Darl, Mac, they've broken through! The Mercs have broken through!" The brown plain was a blood-spattered battlefield. Here and there little groups of the green men, braver than the rest, fought with spanner and hammer and whatever improvised weapon they may have found. "Come on, give 'em hell!" The three Earthmen dashed out, weapons in hand. But friend and foe were so intermingled that they could not use the devastating ray of their hand-guns. The fighting Venusians were vanishing under a tossing sea of yellow imps. And still the dwarfs poured forth from the mine entrance.

A blue form towered, far back, where all green had vanished, and only Mercurians were left. The Martian's beak opened in a rattling call. A group of hundreds of pigmies suddenly left the main fight, and came forward with short, swift steps. They dashed straight for the Earth trio and cut them off from the Venusians they were running to aid.

SIDE by side the three fought. Their weapons grew hot in their hands as the beams cut great swaths in the seething ranks. The attackers halted, gave back, then surged forward again as the roar of their alien commander lashed them on.

The Earthmen faced the frenzied throng. A cleared circle was still around them. Beyond, the Venusians were all down. The Mercurian mob was closing in, the Terrestrians' rays had lost half their range. In moments now the ray-guns would be exhausted.

"The pistols!" Darl shouted. "Back

to the plane, it's our only chance."

The gyrocopter that could carry them aloft, out of the rout, was fifty feet away. They fought through to it and reached it just as the last faint charge flashed from Mac's tube. Jim was at the controls, Darl smashed his useless projector into the chattering face of a dwarf that had leaped on the Scot's shoulders and dragged Angus into the cockpit.

The overloaded flier soared to the landing at the lofty airlock's manhole and hovered as Darl and Angus slipped home the hooks that held it to the platform. "The spy has the Dome," Jim grunted, "but by God, he hasn't got us. We'll be safe in the lock, up here, till help comes. And then—"

"Safe is it?" Angus broke in. "Mon, luik ye what those bairns fra hell are up to the noo."

A yellow tide was rising about the base of each of the latticed steel arches that vaulted to the Earthmen's refuge. On every side the dwarfs were climbing, were swarming up the walls in numbers so great that they concealed the metal beneath. Up, up they came, slowly but surely. And right in the center of the plain, ankle-deep in the torn fragments of the murdered Vepusians, was the Martian, directing the attack.

JIM groaned. "I might've known he'd never let us get away. It's slow bells for us, I guess. Hey, where's Darl?"

"Gone weethin. No, guid loob, he's here!"

Darl appeared, his features pale and drawn, carrying an armful of ray-guns. "Grab these," he snapped. "We're not licked yet."

"Licked, hell!" Jim's roar reverberated. "We've just begun to fight!" The Scot was silent, but the battle light shone in his eyes. In another moment the Terrestrians were kneeling, were raking the roof girders as the mounting Mercurians came within range. Each had two ray-guns in his hands, and a little pile of extra tubes beside him. They fought silently, wasting not a single blast.

Six white rays flamed through the misty, humid air, and striking the teeming girders, swept them clean. A greasy, horrible smoke cloud gathered along the shell and drifted slowly down, till the concrete blocks from which the steel framework sprang were hidden in a black pall. Fighters, these three, true ITA men who had left memories of their battle-prowess on more than one wild planet! Gaunt-bodied, demi-gods of war, they hurled crackling bolts of destruction from their perch at the Dome top. By hundreds, by thousands, the Mercurian pigmies vanished in dark vapor, or plunged, blackened corpses, into the fog that billowed below.

One by one the tubes were discharged and tossed down at the seething mob. The heaped weapons dwindled, and still the climbing hordes renewed themselves, came on in endless mounting streams to sure destruction. The open tunnel vomited forth a torrent of gibbering dwarfs. From the uttermost burrows of the planet the pigmies were flooding in at the call of the Martian who stood scatheless beneath and lashed them on with the strange dominance he held over them. The Earthmen fought on, endlessly, till they were sick of killing, nauseated with slaughter. And still the snouted, red-eyed imps came on.

JIM snatched up his last two ray-guns. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that Darl was using but one, the other, his last, was thrust into the chief's belt. He wondered at this, but a new spurt of yellow above the oily fog wiped

the question from his lips. "Swallow that, you filthy lice! Hope you like the way it tastes!" His guns spouted death.

"I'm through!" The call came at last from McDermott. "Me too!" Jim Holcomb hurled his final, futile tubes down at the blue figure of the Mars man. A moment's hush held the trio. Then Jim flexed his great hands. "Well, these'll take care of a couple more o' them before I check in."

"No you don't," Darl barked, his face a graven image. "Inside with you. The lock will hold 'em off."

"Yeah? Look."

Thomas swung in the direction Jim was pointing. Rising above the murk, something glinted in the pale light. On the furthest upright a clumped group of climbing savages were struggling to drag up one of the welding machines, a long black hose snaking from its cylindrical bulk.

"They'll cut through the steel in fifteen minutes with that. The bloody bugger ain't missin' a trick."

"Inside, I tell you." Darl's crisp tone of command brooked no denial. The three crowded into the cool recesses of the marmade serie. Angus slammed the steel door shut. Even if by some miracle the Dome wall should be pierced and the air in the main vault dissipated into outer space, this air-tight compartment hung from the hemisphere's roof would remain, a last refuge, till the atmosphere within had become poisonous through the Earthmen's slow breathing. But the Martian had anticipated Darl's final move. The oxy-hydrogen jet of the welding machine the dwarfs were hoisting would make short work of their final defense.

FROM the conning-tower above Ram-loo called excitedly. Through all the long battle the Venusian had remained steadfast at the peri-telescope, scanning the vacant terrain outside, and the heavens. As Darl and Jim dashed for the stairs Mac ran after them, crying out, "What did he say, mon?"

"Space ship in sight," Darl flung over his shoulder as he reached the upper landing.

"Praise be! Noo the haythen weel get his desairts!"

"Yeah, maybe—if it's an Earth ship. But we won't be here to see it."

Jim's red head was bending over the peri-telescope view-screen. "She's still thirty thousand miles away. Give her a speed of fifteen per second—she'll have to slow up to land, can't make it under forty-five minutes. By then we'll be in little pieces. It took me ten minutes to burn through the barrier when I rescued Darl, and it won't take the Mercs any longer to get at us."

Darl was very sober as he looked on with narrowed eyes. Against a background of velvet black, gold spangled, the slim space-traveler showed. The sun's rays caught her, and she was a tiny silver fish in the boundless void.

"Luik ye, mon, luik ye!" Angus, fairly dancing with excitement, elbowed Darl aside. "She's from Airth, richt enow!" At the nose of the oncoming flier a rapid succession of colored lights had flashed, the recognition signal that should give her safe access to the Dome. Again there was a coruscation of coded flashes. "She's a battle cruiser, what's mair!" the Scot exclaimed.

DARL sprang to the keyboard that manipulated the signal lights from the Dome's roof. "No use," he said after a short while. "The Martian has cut off the current from the dynamos. I can't warn the ship." He made a hopeless gesture.

Jim looked at him wonderingly. "Warn 'em? What for? Even if we are all dead when she reaches here, at least she'll clean up the Mercs, and retake the Dome for Earth."

"Don't you see it? When the Mars man has once blasted his way in here and disposed of us, he'll be ready for the space ship. Her captain can't suspect anything wrong. He must have left Earth at the time of the ultimatum, and would easily get here before any ship could be sent out from Mars. He'll come on till he's within range of the beam-thrower, and the Martian will aim, press the trigger and the Earth ship and her crew of a half a thousand brave lads will be star-dust."

"Oh God!" Jim was white-faced. "Isn't there anything we can do? Maybe if he doesn't get our all-clear signal he'll sheer off." This was clutching at straws.

"Why should he? He must know how short-handed we are, and will simply think we're not on watch, or that our signal lights are out of order. Matter of fact, if he were at all suspicious he should be altering his course right now—and he hasn't. Look."

Seemingly motionless, but really splitting the ether with terrific speed, the warship was coming straight on to garrison the beleaguered post. She had never wavered from her straight course for the Dome. The little group was silent, watching the help that was coming at last, coming too late.

FROM below there came a thunder of sound. Jim slid down the stairs. An irregular disk on the wall was glowing cherry-red from the heat of the blow-torch without, and the metal was quivering under the Mercurian's sledge-hammer blows. "Darl's right," he almost sobbed as he gazed helplessly. "They'll be through in no time. The Dome's gone, we're gone, the space ship's gone!"

"Let me pass, Jim." Thomas' quiet voice sounded behind him. Holcomb turned. His leader was in a space suit, the helmet still unfastened.

"Blazes! Where the devil are you going?"

"Here, cover me with this till I reach the gyrocopter, then get back quick, and seal the air-lock." Darl thrust into Jim's hand the ray-gun he had previously reserved. "There's only one way to kill off the Martian and his mob. I'm taking it."

Suddenly Jim Holcomb understood. "No, Darl, no—you can't do it! Not you! Let me go! I'm just a dumbhead. Let me go!"

"Thanks, Jimmy, but it's my place." Darl's voice was low, and very calm. "I was in charge, and I lost the Dome. If I can save the boys on the ship, and you two, it's the least I can do. Good-by, old man. Give my regards to Earth."

Thomas' face was gray-white. The thick bandages that still swathed him, Jim glimpsed them through the open neckpiece of the suit, gave him the semblance of a mummy. The helmet clicked shut. Swallowing a lump that rose in his throat, Jim pulled open the door. A wave of Mercurians surged in, to be seared into nothingness by his weapon. He was in the doorway, his ray sweeping the platform clear.

Darl was out now, stepping into the flier that still hung by its hooked moorings. Jim caught a flash of blue and looked up. The Martian was hanging to a girder just above, his green tube pointing straight at Darl. A white ray spurted from Jim's gun. The Martian's weapon and the hand that held it vanished in the sizzling blast. The plane was loose! Jim leaped inside the air-lock, slammed the steel door shut, clamped it, and sprang for the quartz peer-hole.

DARL'S gyrocopter was diving on a long slant for the Dome wall. Faster and faster it went, till all Jim could see was a white streak in the smoky dimness. And now he could see the vast interior, the teeming plain, the dwarf-fenestrated girders and roof-beams. He stood rigid, waiting breathlessly. Then the plane struck—fair in the center of a great panel of quartz. The wall exploded in a burst of flying, shattered splinters. A deafening crash rocked the Dome.

Jim clung to his port-hole, tears rolling down his cheeks, unashamed. The plane, and Darl, vanished. Jim saw the black smoke masses whirl through the jagged hole in the Dome's wall as the air burst out in a cyclonic gust. He saw the vast space filled with falling Mercurians, saw a blue form plunge down and crash far below. He knew that in all that huge hemisphere, and in the burrows beneath it, there was no life save himself, and Angus, and the faithful Ban-lon. For only in this compartment that clung to the roof of the Dome was there left air to breathe. And, from the void beyond, the silver space ship sped on toward Mercury, sped on to a safe landing that, but for Darl Thorpe's sacrifice, would have been her doom. . . .

Guided by Jim and Angus, a party of men from the battle flier, equipped with oxygen respirators, went to the aid of Darl. They dug him out from under his crumpled plane and the piled splinters of quartz. His metal was dented and twisted, but unpierced. They carried him tenderly to the space ship, and carefully set him down. The ship's physician listened long with his stethoscope, then looked up and smiled.

"He's alive," the doctor said, "just barely alive. The thick padding of bandages must have saved him from the full shock of the crash. They're hard to kill, these ITA men. I'll be able to bring him around, God willing."

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Dear Editor:

Your magazine was a day late this month. Gr-r-r! What have you to say for yourself?

And say, it is two months since Diffin's "Brood of the Dark Moon" finished. I've been real patient, but don't you think it's time for a sequel? Those snakes or flying fish must be getting a kick out of belaguring this old world, and there are so many things about the Dark Moon we'd like to know. Tell Diffin to get busy and come across.

Don't change the size of the magazine. If you do, it will be just like the other Science Fictions, and we will be walking off with the wrong book. Besides, it is just a nice library size as it is, and the larger magazine is too clumsy.—Evelyn King, 156½ W. 39th St., Los Angeles, Cal.

So Do We All

Dear Editor:

I am writing to thank you for getting a sequel to "Brigands of the Moon," by Ray Cummings. To my mind, that is one of the best stories you have published in your two years of existence.

"Brood of the Dark Moon" proved to be a worthy sequel to "Dark Moon." Diffin writes good stories. I wish he would write more stories like "The Power and the Glory." It is that kind of story that leaves an impression upon the minds of those who read it.—Oswald Train, Box 94, Barnesboro, Pa.

Ye Gods!—"Paul's Relations"!

Dear Editor:

I happened to take a little trip in my time traveller to the year 565,650 the other night (and not in my dreams, either, for I have invented a mechanism that will take me up the stream of time without so much as getting my feet wet!). I didn't get to stay long but I managed to bring back a history book dealing with the period around 2000.

Of course, as I expected, I found the history very wrong on certain points, and one, in particular, was highly distorted. It read like this (I have copied it just as it was in the book): "The editor of S. F. mag Astounding Stories in year 2003 gave in to readers & brot out 'quarterly.' Also mag was enlarged & edges smoothed. Paul's relations, almost good as famous artist himself did most of illustrating . . ." But why go on? Could history be more mixed up? A quarterly in 2003, my aunt! Aunt!

These future historians were all wet. If they get one by 501,850 and three more zeroes after that they can consider themselves lucky! Oh well . . .

The Jan. '32 issue started out fine. Looks like a great year coming up for "our" magazine with Cummings in the next four issues. And we've got a second story by Francis Flagg! This is great! And so's "The Seed of the Toe-Toe Birds." Capt. Meek's first continued story for "us" was a humdinger. The others were O. K. too, but the story I want to comment upon is the one that was published in the December, '31, issue: "Out Around Riegel." That yarn was a surprise. It wasn't even announced as coming and yet it was a superb story—among the 10 or 15 best I have ever read. And from a comparative newcomer. Let's have more from Mr. Wilson.—Forrest J. Ackerman, 530 Staples Avenue, San Francisco, California.

Try It

Dear Editor:

This is a letter from one of your subscribers who has just decided to "Come over," one who has taken in all, but has just now decided to spike the guns of those who claim you publish stories that are impossible and insult their intelligence. I have just finished reading a true account of an event taken from police archives at Lyons, France, which, if it had been published in our magazine as a story would, no doubt, have "insulted" certain people's intelligences.

Your mag is supreme in size, and also your illustrations. Of the several Science Fiction magazines I receive every month, I find Astounding Stories my favorite. Let's have more stories of Dr. Bird and Saranoff; about the Dark Moon and Special Patrol. May I suggest to my fellow readers that to get the real thrill of reading the stories in "our" magazine that they forget all else and imagine that they are a third party to all that happens. Try it. I am sure a surprise is in store for all. More power to "our" magazine.

Why not every month for Strange Tales? The first two issues are above par. —George C. Kern, 2371 Main St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Better Interplanetary Enmity

Dear Editor:

I certainly agree with Mr. George N. Metyes as to A. S. writers using Russia as a land of scoundrels and enemies of America. If the United States recognized Russia it would be all right, but with our present attitude of considering it a struggling young country, it is to the very undiplomatic that it should be picked as a conspiring enemy. We should remember the youthful mind that reads these stories and takes fiction for realities. To poison youthful minds against a nation not recognized by the United States is dangerous to the best interest of those who must become citizens of to-morrow.

Bringing enemies from other planets to Earth, regardless of how exaggerated our writers may paint them, is not near as harmful as to use a nation on which one daily reads all kinds of conflicting and slanderous reports.

Astounding Stories can perform a great service in awakening people, and causing them to become thinkers. That alone is worth while, and I wish to add my enthusiastic support and appreciation of the splendid work given towards arousing interest in super-science.—J. L. Stark, 519 Marion St., R. Taylor Bldg., Louisville, Ky.

Wants Earth Stories

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your very entertaining magazine since your first issue. I have liked most of your stories, but I am getting sick of the interplanetary stuff. There are plenty of other things on which interesting stories may be based. The North and South Poles, inside the earth, in the atoms, molecules, electrons, electricity, chemistry, and lost races are good subjects. There seems to be very few stories about these subjects. The interplanetary stories are almost all of the same type.

The appearance of the magazine is good, except the rough edges. I like the true science articles that you have published lately. How about more of them?

If Mr. Wheeler didn't like the cover of the September issue, why didn't he tear it off and then continue reading the magazine?

I am 19 and would like to correspond with anyone, anywhere, who is interested in the different branches of science.—Vincent Mason, Box 49, University, Ala.

Go On—Do Your Worst!

Dear Editor:

I firmly believe that now and then you could give the eager public a futuristic murder mystery story. Stories from planet to planet and the falling in love with a girl are all right, but I think we should have a change now and then.

If you do not print one soon I threaten to write one myself! And I don't think you would like that!—Hans Vonnoch, General Delivery, Louisville, Ky.

Approval

Dear Editor:

Just a brief note to tell you I liked the January issue of Astounding. It's the first copy I've seen in a blue moon, being usually too busy to read. But if preceding issues were as good as this one then you're doing a good job of editing.

The Burks' novel starts off with a gasch. One wonders at the cavalier way brides are transplanted, but that's a minor matter with me. No kick.

I still think Flagg gets more solid realism and originality than the average author; also he generally writes better. The Tee-Tee yarn by him is the best story in the issue. Ernst's story comes next.

Well, congrats on turning out a fine issue.—Harry Jaeger, 2900 Jordan Rd., Oakland, Cal.

Whatta Suggestion!

Dear Editor:

Ernst!—Attention: How did Thorn Winters' eyes become invisible with the two small hollow hemispheres of glass capped over them, and still retain their sight or vision?

All of the stories in the January issue were excellent. "Creatures of Vibration" ranking lowest, and "The Winged Men of Orcon" and "The Seed of the Tee-Tee Birds" taking first and second place in my opinion.

Having been a reader of A. S. for some two years, I always eagerly await its arrival on the newsstands. It is the best Science Fiction magazine on the market, and the lowest priced. The only helpful suggestion I can make is that you cut the price to ten cents and still give us the same quality of stories. But I guess that would almost be impossible. [I kind of guess it would!—E.S.]—Colquehoun Kartchreid, 658 South 5th St., Louisville, Ky.

From ah Konfirmed Pessimist

Dear Editor:

Not for argumentative purposes, but to get something out that has been worrying me for some time, I'm writing this letter. I understand that from medieval times up until the time of George Washington, writings were penned or printed with every ordinary noun capitalized. Astounding Stories has in "The Readers' Corner" for the past few issues been capitalizing such ordinary, everyday words as "reader," "author," "editor," etc. At first I thought it was the usage of the writers, but I soon became convinced it was Ye Ed's own doings. I can't understand such barbarism back to days long past. I thought such senseless, useless practices were long dead, and I find them turning up in the very most futuristic of magazines, Astounding Stories! Are we retrograding? But perhaps it is some new rule of grammar I have missed! [Aw, have a heart. We're stopping all that—and beginning now.—E.S.]

This is the first time I have ever criticised what another said in the "Corner," but Mr. Bolmer's blooper in the January issue is inexcusable for a stfist and a gentleman, eh! I have heard somewhere here before that the only departure from modesty a reader sees in an illustration or such a stf magazine exists in his own mind. This would seem to apply, for I'm sure I saw nothing immodest in the October issue's cover, and never would unless I was born in 1830 [when people knew nothing of certain things, and were supposed to know even less.—E.S.]. I took no offense at what seemed a very ordinary thing.

One more thing for the holder of the editorial chair to tear up. That is: although I realize what a difficult thing it would be to step away from all conventions of to-day, why do not S. F. magazines, being as they are advocators of advancement, cast all prejudice aside, and adopt and use such a sensible and time-saving thing as phonetic spelling? H. G. Wells introduces this admirably in his "When The Sleeper Wakes." The Literary Digest, one of the largest circulated periodicals, and one of the best in standing in literary circles, uses the phonetic spelling of such often-used words as "thru," "altho," "thruout," etc. The English of to-day can still be compared to that of Chaucer—it is so awkwardly spelled. If words were spelled as they are pronounced, how much simpler it would be!

I think this task of bringing a little advancement to the world lies at the feet of stfists the world over. It is one of the countless stupid things done by the poor misguided human race that should be corrected. I'm putting it before the editor of a magazine that professes to be a thinking one if it should not be so [?—E.S.]. Such a thing as even part phonetic spelling in A. S. would be an advancement, and might help induce the human race as a whole to adopt something new. It takes a start to change the stupid convention of our uncontrollable race, and I look to the S. F. world to help the world advance—not only in such a little thing as this, but in everything that means change.

This world is a peculiar thing, either going backward by irregular jumps or ahead the same knuckle way. I'm a confirmed pessimist on the subject of the human race—but what intelligent person isn't?—Linus Hogemiller, 362 N. Washington, Farmington, Mo.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and 'possibilities'—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time I may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *readers*, and I invite you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—*The Editor.*

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